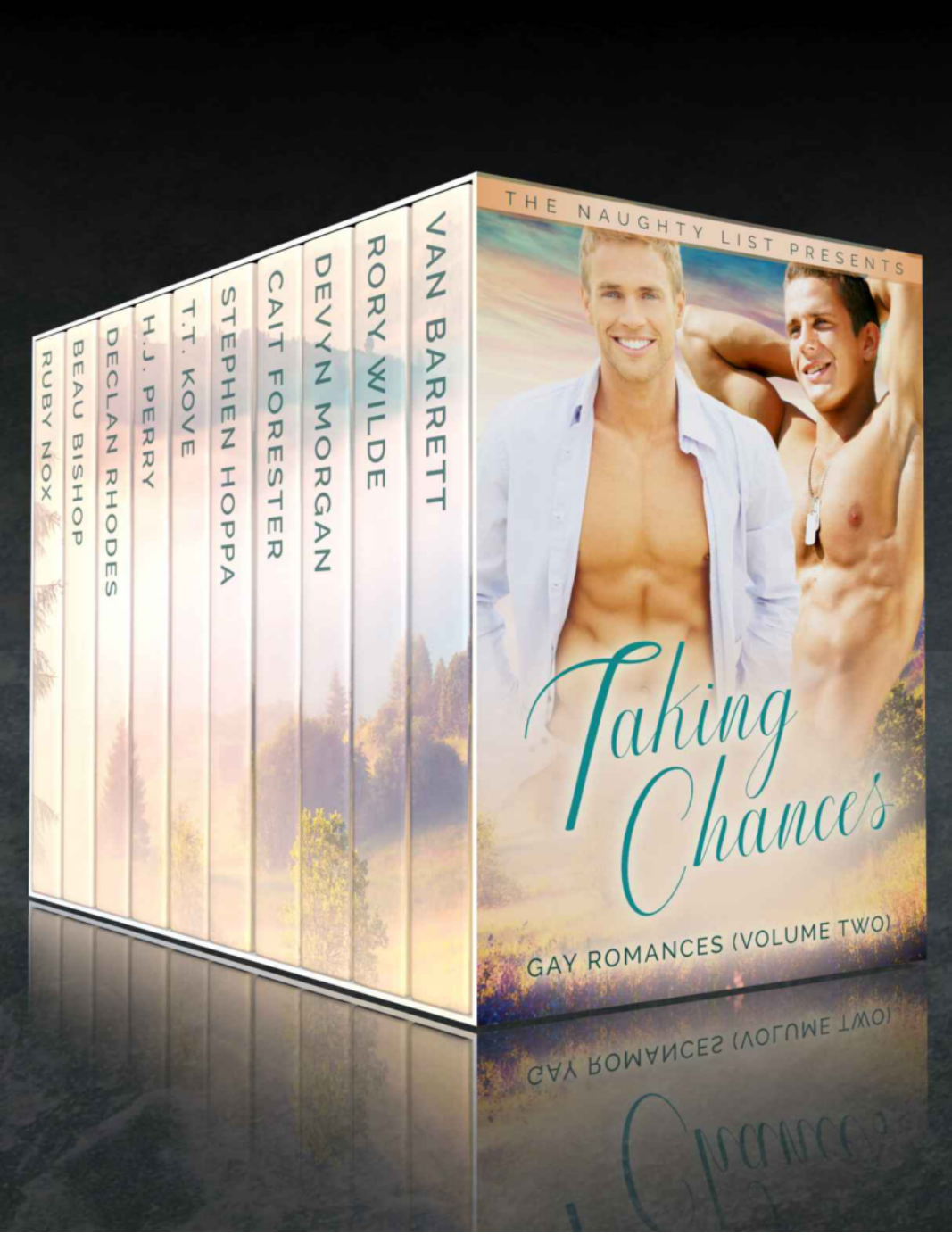
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Honeymoon Hoax

By Devyn Morgan

Chapter 1
Cameron

For the second night in a row, I was the only sober guy out of the five of us. Last night we hit the Las Vegas strip for my best friend Brad Taylor's bachelor party and stayed out until three in the morning, stumbling from strip joint to casino to bar and then back around again. I'd barely managed to drag Brad out of bed in the morning in time to make sure he arrived sober and somewhat presentable at the chapel.

It turned out that I shouldn't have even bothered though, since his fiancée Cammie never showed up. Her maid-of-honor broke the news to Brad at the chapel, telling him that Cammie had taken the earliest flight to her mom's home in Austin.

So tonight all the guys had gathered in the honeymoon suite to scarf down the wedding cake and work through the prepaid bottles of wine. We were all still in our matching tuxes, collapsed around the room in various states of disarray. Piles of unopened wedding presents were heaped on every visible surface, and the platters that had once held fancy canapés had been tossed carelessly into a heap in the corner.

Harold, who'd been Brad's co-captain on the football team in high school and now headed a security company, was gesturing toward the presents. "Dude, you should totally return them for the cash. *Especially* the presents from her family. It's the least they could do after raising such a heartless daughter."

"Don't you call her heartless," Brad slurred. "Cammie's cool. And sweet. She's cool and sweet like ice cream. That's why I proposed to her in the first place. She just freaked out – could happen to anyone." He knocked back a huge swig of red wine straight from the bottle.

"What did she have to freak out about? Besides the fact that you were marrying a girl with the same name as your best friend."

The irony of Brad's now ex-fiancée also being named Cameron Hines was something I'd never gotten used to. I'd been repressing my earth-shattering crush on Brad ever since we hit puberty together, watching him work his way through an endless line of girls – cheerleaders and sorority girls, nerds and drama geeks, tomboys and athletes. Everyone fell for him hard. How could they not, with his chiseled, movie-star face, gorgeous blue eyes, and sleek, wavy dark hair?

I thought I'd seen him fall into and out of bed with enough

women to move beyond my jealousy – but then the one with *my name* ended up being the one he wanted to marry. Even though I knew I should have felt bad for Brad as I watched him drink himself into a stupor over being left at the altar, I was unmistakably – and more than a little guiltily – relieved.

Brad was still rambling. “Marriage is a huge step. She didn’t think we were ready for it, and she’s probably right.” He paused and glanced a little sluggishly around the room. “Guys, can I tell you a secret?”

He was met with a chorus of affirmatives, although I knew Stewart was probably lying. He couldn’t keep a secret to save his dog’s life.

“The truth is I was just about ready to turn tail myself. I probably would’ve done it too if it weren’t for the non-refundable cruise tickets. Really, that’s the thing that sucks. All the rest of it was a huge relief, but I was *really* looking forward to that cruise.”

“So why don’t you just go on it anyway?” argued Harold. “You’ve already gotten leave from your slave driver law firm, right? You should use it.”

“Can’t. It was a special deal, for honeymooners only. Some sort of publicity stunt; they called it the *Love Cruise.* No single guys allowed.” Brad sighed and took another swig. “And it came with all these cool packages, too. You know those water jet things that let you fly? You guys know what I mean, right? The ones on Youtube?”

“Flyboards,” I supplied. They did look like fun.

“Yeah, that’s it. I could’ve ridden on a flyboard. Part of the package. Just like freaking Iron Man.”

“Iron Man’s part of the package?” asked Stewart, who had slid onto the floor and was having trouble following the conversation, though whether that was a result of the alcohol or of his general cluelessness was hard to tell.

“Nah, man, they’re these cool boots that make you fly like Iron Man. Dammit, I deserve to fly like that.”

Brad had reached the belligerent phase of his drunkenness, which meant that the melancholy stage was just around the corner. Being the only one in the group who didn’t drink had turned me into an expert on the other guys’ moods when they were wasted. They never gave me crap about being dry, though, if only because Brad would never have allowed it.

“Cammie would’ve never gone for it anyway, dude. You know she can’t stand stuff like that,” remarked Harold reasonably.

“Yeah, I’d figured she’d just hang out at the spa while I did the adventure stuff. Hey, do you think she’d agree to come on the trip anyway, just as friends?”

I sighed, exasperated. “Brad, she’s already flown back to her folks in Austin. I’m guessing she needs to make a clean break of it.”

Brad always had trouble understanding why his girlfriends treated him differently after they broke up. Although…if anyone could’ve managed a just-friends honeymoon, I had to admit it was Cammie. She always gave Brad plenty of space and never tried to interfere with his guy time. She was the perfect girl for him, my gnawing jealousy aside. She had even asked me to stay on as a roommate when she moved in, but I wasn’t *that* much of a masochist.

“Maybe there’s someone else you can take,” said Jerome. He’d been drinking silently, watching the rest of us. Ever since we’d met him in a college study group he’d been like that: quiet, but solid. He was also likely celebrating Cammie’s departure. I’d suspected for a while that he was in love with her himself, though he never would have dared to say such a thing. He had actually been the one to introduce her to the rest of us, bringing her and one of her friends – the three of them all med lab coworkers – to one of our poker nights. Cammie had cleaned Brad out and then invited him for a drink to make up for it. Jerome had likely been regretting not asking her out himself first ever since.

“You mean like hire a hooker? Naw, that would never work. The ticket is already in Cammie’s name, and anyway, they actually require couples to bring proof of marriage. Because of fake couple scams, I guess.”

“No. I mean you should take Cameron.”

My stomach dropped like a brick, and my vision turned fuzzy. I laughed weakly. “Very funny, Jerome.”

Everyone was staring at me. Brad had an excited calculating look on his face, one I knew all too well. That was the look that had ended with us in the principal’s office, or grounded for a month, or both. I was in deep trouble.

“Dude! That is brilliant! We could totally pull that off. I mean, you’re still gay, right?”

I closed my eyes. “Yes, Brad. I am still gay. Just like I’ve been ever since we were thirteen and I couldn’t figure out why you were drooling over Britney Spears.”

“Yeah, if you can’t pop a boner watching “I’m a Slave 4U” you’re definitely gay.”

Of course, I’d had no trouble popping a boner watching Brad watch Britney, but that was another matter.

“Anyway,” he continued, “you could totally coach me to be your newlywed gay husband. We’d have a blast! Seriously, you should see all the extras that come with this package. Not just the flyboard – there’s also scuba diving and a dolphin encounter and a helicopter

ride. Hell, this trip will be tons more fun with you than with Cammie." Brad was staring at me pleadingly, his dark hair flopping over his beautiful blue eyes. "Come on, buddy, what do you say? We won't even have to split it; I'll pay for everything."

I steeled myself to resist. "Brad, you said it yourself. They need proof of marriage. I'm not committing forgery so that you can ride a flyboard." He visibly deflated, and I sternly told myself that the sinking feeling in my own stomach was relief.

Then Jerome just had to speak up again "Then why not just get married? We are in Vegas, you know. There's probably a dozen places we could walk to that would get you married before morning."

I shot Jerome a glare. He had to have been messing with me now. Observant as he was, he must've noticed my crush on Brad, just like I'd seen his crush on Cammie. As much as I hated to admit it even to myself, though, Jerome's ludicrous idea would probably work. We already had the marriage license that would allow us to get married in any Las Vegas chapel. Not only did Cammie and I have the same name, my passport and driver's license still listed Brad's apartment as my residence. I'd been meaning to have them changed after I moved out, but never got around to it. As far as paperwork was concerned, I may as well have been the Cameron Hines that Brad had been planning to marry all along.

Brad was looking excited again. "Of course! Come on, Cameron. A quickie Las Vegas marriage is an adventure everyone should experience! We can just get it annulled when we get back, on the grounds of non-consummation or something."

I shook my head when he brought up an annulment, doing my best not to appear as crushed as I was feeling.

"Or we could totally consummate it, if you want. A blow job at least – it's the least I could do for you, buddy."

Despite everything, I laughed. "As if I'd want a sloppy amateur blow job from a straight dude."

"Well, I didn't say *I'd* be the one doing the blowing."

I rolled my eyes. "Not going to waste my talents on a straight guy either. Come on, Brad. Be serious."

"I can do that. I can be serious." Brad levered himself off the couch and staggered over to me, the half-empty wine bottle still in hand. He dropped down on one knee, grabbed my hand before I could pull it away, and looked up into my eyes.

"Cameron Hines, would you do me the very great honor of being my wedded husband? And go with me on the most awesome vacation ever?"

I heard a click, and I looked over to catch Jerome snapping a picture with his phone. All the other guys were staring at me.

I sighed. I just couldn't deny my best friend. "I suppose so."

Brad whooped and jumped to his feet, nearly braining me with the wine bottle. "Yes! We're going to the Caribbean! Thanks, Cam, this is really going to be awesome."

I couldn't help but smile to see him so excited. I hoped he was right.

Harold was tapping away at his phone. "Looks like there's a chapel just down the strip with a reservation open about an hour from now. I'm going to grab it." He chuckled. "Hey! Looks like they have a *Star Wars* theme package!"

"I'm not wearing hair buns," I said firmly. "Or a Darth Vader costume."

"Nah, it's the officiant that wears the costume. And the wedding march is from the soundtrack. Only fifty bucks extra. We are so doing this – my treat!"

Jerome appointed himself valet, walking around to each of us and straightening our tux shirts and retying our bow ties. Within five minutes we were back to a close approximation of an actual wedding party. Stepping out into the cool night air helped sober the guys up somewhat, although nothing could repress their good spirits. For whatever reason, they seemed more excited about this wedding than the one that was supposed to have happened this morning.

The chapel, gleaming white with a modest steeple, was squashed between a strip club and a bar. We were greeted by a woman in a Princess Leia costume – complete with hair buns. They suited her better than they would have me, that was certain. "Come in, come in. You're the Taylor-Hines party, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Brad. "I'm Brad Taylor."

We followed her through the wooden doors to a chapel that looked no different from any other church I've been to, save for the absence of religious symbols and the presence of statues of the *Star Wars* robots near the front. An older black man in what was presumably a Wookiee costume without the head was adjusting the statues. The woman turned around once we'd reached the altar. "Alright, y'all have scheduled the standard ceremony. I'll be officiating. There's time for a reading or a song if you want to add it in. Also, do you plan to read your own vows?"

Brad shook his head, and I tried to ignore the stab of disappointment. I'd helped him write his vows to Cammie, perfectly funny and sweet and heartfelt – and nothing he'd ever say to me.

"Naw, the standard ceremony would be just fine."

"Very well. Then there's just the matter of the paperwork. Once that's done, we can start as soon as the bride's party arrives. Is she on the way? We have another booking at 9:30 and will need to

reset the chapel, so it's important to start on time."

Brad laughed and pulled me forward. "The bride's already here. This is my fiancé, Cameron Hines."

She seemed to take it in stride. "Ah, of course, my apologies."

I punched Brad in the shoulder. "Seriously? If anyone is the bride, it's you. You're too pretty to be the groom."

Brad fluttered his eyelashes, and my stomach flipped. "Aw, you really think I'm pretty?"

"You are both very handsome grooms," remarked Princess-what's-her-name primly. "Now, do you have the marriage license?"

I did indeed have the marriage license, in addition to the rings and the gratuity for the officiant; I'd been carrying them around all day. I wondered if we should keep the tip since we were already paying for the service, but I decided not to be cheap. After a few minutes of scrawling through paperwork, the marriage party held a hurried consultation. We decided that Harold, Jerome, and Stewart would stand at the front of the church with the princess, and Brad and I would march down the aisle together. The Wookiee would be recording and photographing the event, though how he'd manage to do so while wearing the headpiece of his costume I had no idea.

The fanfare from the throne room scene blared over the sound system, and I started cracking up. Brad was also laughing next to me, and we grinned at each other. This was all so surreal.

The Wookiee turned the volume down when we reached the front of the church and stood before the princess. I hardly understood a word she was saying, though, as it finally hit me that I was actually getting married – legally married – to Brad. We'd even have the video to prove it. What were my parents going to say?

"Do you have rings?" the princess asked.

Brad began to shake his head, but I pulled from my pocket the small box that held the two plain gold bands. "We may as well use them," I told Brad.

He started to respond, but after a second he just shrugged. Maybe he was worried about sizing. I thought it best not to tell him that I had tried Cammie's ring on in private the other day, just to see what it felt like. I'd always had small hands for a guy, and her ring fit me perfectly. But now it was Brad who slid it onto my finger, repeating the vows the princess recited for him.

My hand shook as I took the other ring and grasped Brad's hand. He squeezed my hand tightly. "It'll be okay, buddy," he whispered.

I exhaled a calming breath and repeated the vows. "With this ring, I, Cameron Hines, take you, Bradford Taylor, to be my lawfully

married husband, to have and to hold from this day forward; for better or for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish until death do us part."

The princess smiled brilliantly at us. "I now pronounce you spouses for life. You may kiss."

I froze, but Brad pulled me close without hesitation. His lips brushed feather-light against mine, and I shivered uncontrollably. He smiled down at me and said, "For luck."

I laughed when I caught the reference. We may not have been swinging over a shaft with Stormtroopers firing at us, but my heart was pounding as if we were in a firefight regardless. The music swelled again, and I took that as our cue. I grabbed Brad's hand and marched back down the aisle with him, the other guys trailing behind. The whole ceremony had taken maybe ten minutes.

I looked down at my ring. I was *married*.

***

Our nuptial feast turned out to be chicken wings and beer, as well as free designated-driver sodas for me. Beer on top of wine sounded like a recipe for disaster to me, but it wasn't my stomach. On the other hand, I'd still probably pay for it, since odds were that I'd be the one cleaning up vomit at some point that night.

The only time I'd ever gotten drunk I was eighteen, sick of pining over my straight best friend, and furtively sneaking to a gay nightclub on a mission to lose my virginity. It had been easy enough to get a couple of rounds of free drinks in exchange with a few smiles and some dirty dancing. The rest of that night was a drunken haze, but I still remembered with perfect clarity making out with a dark-haired stranger, calling him Brad and telling him that I loved him, and choking on his dick right there in the hallway next to the restrooms. I also remember throwing up all over the guy's shoes, and getting cursed at and kicked in the face.

I'd managed to call Brad somehow. He came without complaint to pick me up even though it was past midnight. All he asked was that I promise to take him with me next time I went clubbing. I knew that he would've gone too, just to make sure I was safe. He was the only person who knew anything of my real reason for refusing to drink after that night, though he hadn't guessed at the most important part. It wasn't the fear of another drunken sexual encounter that stayed me, but the words of love to him that I'd spilled into a stranger's ear. I couldn't risk those ever coming out again.

Clink-clink-clink-clink! Harold was tapping on his half-empty beer glass with a knife. "A toast! A toast to the happy couple! May

their honeymoon be even more awesome than their wedding!"

"Hear, Hear!" chimed in Stewart and Jerome, clinking their glasses.

"Kiss! Kiss!" shouted Stewart, quickly echoed by the others.

"Guys, stop it!" I told them crossly.

"Ah, come on. You need to practice for your trip," prodded Stewart.

"He has a point," said Brad, leaning close.

I pushed him back. "Not into PDA. You know that."

He was not deterred. "One kiss. No tongue, I promise."

The thought of his tongue slipping into my mouth made my groin throb, and I groaned inwardly. The other guys were all staring expectantly at me as they downed their drinks. There was no way they were going to leave us alone until we kissed. "Fine, but just one. Or I'm leaving."

Brad leaned forward again and pressed his lips gently to mine. The alcohol on his breath was so strong I imagined I could get drunk just on the fumes. He deepened the kiss, and I melted against him without realizing it. I nearly fell off my stool, but he held me steady. The guys were hooting and clapping in the background, though by the time I registered their presence the kiss had gone on for a while. I shakily pulled away, blushing.

Brad sported a wide grin. "Dude, if I had known you were such a good kisser, I'd have married you a long time ago."

"And if I knew you were such a terrible kisser, I'd have never agreed to this. No wonder Cammie dumped you!"

His face fell, and I wanted to kick myself. On impulse I darted forward to kiss him again, this time slipping him some tongue to try to get him to laugh. Instead, he sucked at it eagerly, taking control of the kiss and utterly ravaging my mouth. I groaned into his mouth. Damn – I was getting hard.

"Jesus, guys, get a room!" yelled Stewart.

Brad was smirking at me. "A terrible kisser, am I?"

I gave him an exaggerated huff. "I suppose you're okay. For a straight guy."

Everyone laughed, and the moment passed. I quietly sipped my soda and attempted to will my boner away.

***

The rest of the party was well and truly drunk by the time I'd convinced everyone it was time to go back to the hotel. They staggered together in a shuffling mass, humming Darth Vader's theme wildly off-key. Harold and Stewart's room was on the third floor, so we dropped them off first. I insisted on waiting until they managed to

get the key card to work before we went back to the elevator. The room Jerome and I were sharing was next to the elevator on the fourth floor, the same as the honeymoon suite. I made sure Jerome was safely inside before I helped Brad to the suite. As I fished the key card out of his pocket, he leaned heavily against me and nuzzled my neck.

"Not exactly how I expected my wedding night to go, but still this was fun," he said. "Should I carry you across the threshold?"

"Brad, you can barely carry *yourself* across the threshold. Now let's go."

I nudged him inside and followed directly behind. I wanted to make sure he got enough water into him before he passed out, preferably on the bed. As the door swung closed behind us, he whirled around and pushed me back against it, his hands pressed against the door on either side of my head. My heart beat in double-time.

"Did you mean it, when you said I was a terrible kisser?" Brad was watching my face pleadingly. Dammit.

"Seriously, Brad? You know that you're a great kisser. Now come on."

Rather than letting me go, he bent down to kiss me. I should've pushed him away. I should've ducked under his arm. Instead, I stood frozen as he took possession of my mouth. His tongue pressed against my lips, tasting me, and I opened for him. He pressed up against me, and my erection brushed against his thigh. He had to have felt it, but he only continued the kiss. I settled my arms on his shoulders, needing to hang on to keep from falling. He broke the kiss, but only to plant more kisses on my cheek, along my jaw, and at a spot right under my ear that made my knees buckle. Oh, God….

"Cam, come to bed with me. Please, I'm so horny. Just this once. I want sex so bad."

I made my best effort to recall why having sex with my drunk straight friend was a really bad idea. "You're drunk, Brad. You don't know what you're saying. Anyway, it's not like that whiskey dick of yours can do anything."

"Yeah, but your dick is just fine, isn't it?" he rumbled into my ear, and his thigh pressed harder between my legs. I bucked against it and moaned, and he chuckled hotly into my ear. "I'd be happy to try bottoming, you know. I asked Cammie to peg me a couple of times, but she wasn't interested."

Cammie's name splashed on me like cold water. Brad had been freshly dumped just that morning, and having sex with him when he was drunk and didn't know what he was doing would be the worst sort of betrayal. I gathered my strength, placed both hands against his chest, and pushed. He staggered backwards and nearly fell.

“No! I mean it, Brad. No means no. Don’t be an asshole.”

He just stared at me, a lost look in his watery eyes. Here came the overdue melancholy stage. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry, Cam! Forgive me, please. Listen, I’ll go. Just don’t be mad.”

I sighed. “I’m not mad. And you’re not going anywhere. Come on, let me take care of you. Everything will be fine in the morning.”

“You’re not mad? You promise?” He sounded about twelve years old.

“I promise,” I assured him, guiding him steadily over to the couch. “Now sit there while I get some water.” I fetched a large bottle of water from the mini-fridge – another five bucks on the tab at this point would make little difference – and then sat while Brad drank half of it.

“Now let’s get you to be - to sleep!”

He followed my instructions obediently, and soon I had him stripped down to his boxers and under the covers. I made him drink some more water before I tucked him in.

“Thanks, Cameron,” he murmured, his eyes closing. “You’re the best husband I ever had.”

Husband. He was actually my husband. It was tempting to just slide into bed with him, but that would have been just asking for trouble. Instead, I set a bottle of painkillers beside the water and left for my own room, where Jerome was already snoring away on one of the queen beds. I climbed into the other bed and determinedly focused on sleeping. But still the memory of Brad’s kisses chased me into my dreams.

Chapter 2

Brad

The first thing I noticed when I pried my eyelids open and squinted through the pain of a pounding headache was a bottle of water and an opened bottle of painkillers, two pills already resting on the upturned lid. I recognized Cameron's handiwork, and I blessed his name as I dumped the pills into my mouth and washed them down.

It was then that I noticed the ring on my left hand. *Cameron.* Last night I'd convinced my best friend to marry me. That really happened. And then we'd come back here and….

I was barely able to lurch from the bed and stagger over to the toilet in time before I spewed my guts out. Oh please God, no. *Don't be an asshole,* he'd said, pushing me away. I'd tried to force myself on my best friend. I vomited again.

How could I have been such an idiot? I flashed back to our high school days, to the time I'd found him bruised and sobbing on the floor at that club. I'd made myself a promise then to do whatever I could to keep him from being hurt like that again. But this time…I wasn't expecting that he'd ever need protecting from *me.*

I heard the hotel room door open and a voice call out, "Brad, time to wake up, buddy."

Then the door to the bedroom opened, and I knew Cam was staring at the empty bed. In a few seconds he'd find me in the bathroom. What could I say? I squeezed my eyes shut and rested my head against the toilet.

"Hey Brad, you okay?" he called from the doorway.

I stood up, swaying as little as possible, and rubbed my hand over my face. I focused on holding myself steady as the world spun around me.

"Cam, I'm so sorry…." I started, and already he was there, hugging me close. His fuzzy sweater was rough against the bare skin of my chest. Oh God, I was still wearing nothing but my boxers! I should have pulled away, but I didn't want to disrupt the soothing back rub he was giving me.

"Hey, it's okay. Everything's fine. Morning regret after a drunken Las Vegas marriage is a classic. It's no problem that can't be fixed by a quick trip to the judge."

"No. No! Not the marriage, I didn't mean...I meant last night,

I shouldn't have…."

He turned to look at me, and then laughed in my face. "Drunken gay makeout sessions followed by gay panic is another classic, dude. I promise you, you're still straight."

Even I could tell that his brittle smile was forced. I grabbed his arm as he started to pull away. "Cam, shut up. I'm apologizing for trying to force you into something you didn't want last night."

This time his laugh was more natural. "Believe me, you were in no shape to force me to do anything last night. Seriously, it's cool."

I stared at him a long moment, but he looked sincere. I grinned at him, and all the tension in me melted away. "So, we're *husbands*, right? I didn't imagine that part?"

He smiled ruefully back and held up his left hand to display the gleam of gold. "Yep, that happened. There's video evidence and everything."

My insides lurched at the sight of the ring on his hand. I knew it was just temporary, but still – married. I recalled our original plan.

"You still up for a Caribbean cruise?"

"More ready than you. I already had Cammie's family cart off the presents, and I told your sister to go ahead and take your mom back to Chicago. I said I'd take care of you in your misery by going on vacation with you. I tactfully neglected to mention that I married you."

"Crap! I didn't think of that. I suppose they'll find out sooner or later, right?"

"Given that there's video evidence and three witnesses, one of whom is inclined to gossip, I'd say yes. Do you think your mom will be upset about having me as a son-in-law?"

"Hell no, she'd love it! I've always suspected she'd swap sons with your folks in a heartbeat. What she *will* be pissed at is missing the wedding. And about the annulment. Are you sure we have to tell her?"

"Seriously, when have you been able to keep anything from her? But let's worry about that when we get back from our trip. The plane leaves for Miami in three hours. I've packed your suitcases, but you do still need to dress yourself. I've left clothes on your bed."

"Wow, thanks. I love you, man."

Cameron smirked, though it was a little thin. "I know."

It wasn't until he'd left the bedroom that I figured it out. "Dude, did you just Han Solo me?" I cried out at the closed door.

Muffled laughter answered me. Asshole.

***

Somehow we made it to the airport on time, and we got our luggage checked all the way through to the cruise line. It was a sweet service that saved us the trouble of going through the baggage claim. Really, this cruise package was going to be fantastic. I'd managed to use my miles to get us upgraded to first class; when we hit cruising altitude, I told the flight attendant of the happy occasion. She congratulated us and offered us two complimentary glasses of champagne.

Cameron opened his mouth, but I beat him to it. "Do you have sparkling cider?" She hurried to the front to make the substitution.

"I don't mind if you drink," said Cameron. "You know that."

"Let me get over this hangover first before adding a cheap champagne buzz on top. I'm pretty sure there'll be plenty of booze on the boat."

After last night though, I wasn't planning on drinking much on this vacation. I didn't want to make Cam feel bad, but it wasn't much fun drinking alone. Not to mention, I didn't want to risk a repeat of last night.

Or did I? Under different circumstances I might have actually enjoyed finishing what we'd started. I thought about the taste of Cameron's mouth, and the feel of his body against mine. It wasn't just the alcohol talking when I asked him to bed. I mean, I wasn't gay, but how different could it really be? Kissing was kissing, and friction was friction. The big change would be dealing with another erection, but I already knew firsthand that that could work for me. I bet that I could make it good for Cameron too, if he'd give it a chance.

Ugh.…I needed to stop perving out over my best friend, but it had been almost a month since I'd had sex. I'd been working eighty-hour weeks at the firm so I could take time off for the wedding, and Cammie's mom had kept her busy with wedding preparations. In retrospect, it was probably telling that neither Cammie nor I had made time for sex – somehow the idea of getting married had taken over our actual relationship. Really, her pulling the plug on the wedding was the smartest thing she could've done. The only thing that surprised me is that she didn't have the guts to dump me in person. It was very unlike her. She was the first girl I dated who was as straightforward as my guy buddies.

I looked over at Cameron, who was concentrating on the in-flight menu. Even though I wasn't gay, he was, objectively speaking, a good looking guy. A little shorter than me, with a handsome face and good hair. We'd definitely make a believable newlywed couple. I was secure enough in my masculinity that I could even handle some PDA if necessary. Heck, straight guys had been attracted to other guys for as

long as there have been prisons, naval ships, and monasteries. Well, maybe not monasteries, but the point was that it wasn't weird at all that I could enjoy having sex with Cameron even if I wasn't gay.

I was becoming aroused at the thought, and I frowned. If it turned out that Cameron wasn't interested in the friend-with-married-benefits experience, it was going to be hard – difficult – to get any sexual relief on the ship, since we were supposed to be part of a happy couple.

My thoughts were interrupted when the flight attendant arrived with our glasses of cider. Cameron ordered a cheese and fruit plate, but with my stomach still aching from the hangover I didn't want to risk any food.

I was gingerly taking my first sip of cider when Cameron pointedly cleared his throat and raised his glass. "To us, in the Caribbean!" he announced, and I clinked glasses with him.

"To us!"

He drank half his glass down in gulp, and the motion of his long throat as he swallowed caught my attention. I had an embarrassing impulse to kiss his neck. I must have really been pent up to get aroused by a dude's Adam's apple bobbing. Jesus.

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I was expecting Miami to be hot as hell, but instead the city greeted us with a mild and breezy tropical day. There was a car waiting for us attended by a driver in full uniform, who was holding up a tablet with Taylor-Hines displayed electronically. Very cool. He'd even brought a little cart for our carry-on luggage.

The guy's name was Ramone, and he'd lived in Miami all his life. "So you two definitely need to visit *Score* before your boat leaves. Best club in SoBe!"

Cameron laughed. "Yeah, I've heard about that place. You're crazy if think I'm going to let this guy anywhere near that mantrap, dude. We just got married!"

Ramone eyed me in the rearview mirror. "Good point, man. Well there's also *Magnum Lounge*. It's got a nice piano bar and an older crowd. Good martinis and some seriously tasty fried chicken."

It finally hit me that they were talking about gay bars… because of course Ramone thought we were gay. After all, we were posing as a gay couple. I wondered if I should participate and help keep our cover, but Cameron seemed to have the conversation well in hand. It was interesting to hear him talk with Ramone. Cam has never been overly effeminate or what the guys thought of as "gay," although he'd been out and proud since high school. Most of the time I didn't think of him as gay; he was my best friend, and that was all that

mattered. But when he talked with Ramone, his manner subtly shifted. He talked more freely, more fluidly. It made me consider the possibility that he might have been on guard as part of his "normal" behavior, even with me. The thought made me uneasy.

"Here you go, guys. *Majestic Caribbean Cruise*, departing for the Western Caribbean at 4 o'clock. Congratulations, and have fun!"

I shouldered my carry-on satchel while Cameron gave Ramone a tip – a good one too, judging from the driver's grin. Cameron grabbed his rolling bag, and we headed towards the gangplank. A small crowd of smiling men and women wearing blue polo shirts with the cruise line logo and carrying clipboards greeted the line of couples at the base of the gangplank. Our greeter was a perky blonde woman with dazzling white teeth.

"Welcome to the *Majestic* Love Cruise!" How she was able to deliver that line without cracking up I didn't know. "My name's Maggie. Can I have your names and IDs, please?"

"Brad Taylor and Cameron Hines," I replied, pulling out my wallet. Cameron did the same.

Maggie checked her clipboard, then looked back up at us, startled. "Oh my, you are one of our *Majestic* Love Cruise Newlyweds! I wasn't expecting…."

My goodwill towards this woman evaporated. I was not going to let her ruin this vacation. I struggled to keep my voice calm. "You weren't expecting...what?"

"I wasn't expecting a gay couple!" My anger was on the verge of erupting, but she kept talking. "Oh, this is so exciting. You two are our very first gay newlyweds! I bet you'll make the cover for sure!"

"Cover?" asked Cameron.

"Of the *Majestic* Love Cruise Newlywed profile magazine, of course!"

"Of course," Cameron responded dryly, shooting me a sideways glance.

I cleared my throat. "It's part of the package. They'll take some photos, and do an interview about our trip. They, um, distribute it to wedding planners and such. It's pretty popular."

Maggie broke in. "And gay marriage is so hot right now, so I know the cruise line is looking to expand into that market. They might even do a special feature!"

I wouldn't have been surprised if she got a bonus for handling couples that made good copy. Out of the corner of my eye I observed Cameron's amused smile growing larger.

"Anyway, let's get you checked in. Do you have the marriage certificate?"

I stared back at her blankly. I had no idea where the certificate was, or if we even had one. Before I could panic, Cameron unzipped the outer pocket of his roll-on bag and pulled out an envelope. She took the envelope and filled out some information on the clipboard.

"Okay. Let's get your welcome photos done, and then you can go to your cabin. The photographer is set up by the forward railing."

She led the way up the gangplank, and Cameron and I followed behind. "I thought you were about to take her head off," Cameron whispered. "I swear you worry more about me being insulted than I do."

It was true I'd always been protective of Cameron, ever since he came out in our junior year of high school. Then again, I would have liked to think of myself as someone who'd stand up against bigotry no matter what.

"Well, this week at least I may also be a target. Although it seems our hostess is ready to put up rainbow colored banners for us."

"Yeah, about that," Cameron remarked drily. "We're going to be on the cover of a magazine as majestic newlyweds? What were you thinking?"

"That it would be a nice souvenir?" To tell the truth, I hadn't thought about all the promotional obligations of the trip that came with the discounted prices when I had asked him to marry me.

He shook his head fondly. "Idiot." Maggie heard him, but she only smiled.

"Okay, I know you guys want to get to your cabin and, um, relax, but just a few photos first. We like to capture the first and last moments of the trip."

The photographer arranged us side-by-side next to the railing, with the setting sun behind the Miami skyline as a backdrop. He turned us toward each other and arranged our arms in a loose embrace. Briefly, I thought of my engagement photos with Cammie, but I immediately shook off the memory. She wasn't here. I was with Cameron.

"Okay, look each other in the eyes and think about how much you love each other," the photographer instructed.

The photographer's words gave me a peculiar twist in my stomach. In my heart of hearts, I knew I'd never felt the kind of romantic love you were supposed to feel for your soulmate. I only proposed to Cammie because I didn't think I'd find another girl who fit in with my life so well. My friendship with Cameron had always seemed more important than romance. Now I was supposed to fake that romantic feeling with the same dude I'd set off fireworks with

down in the empty lot at the end of the street. To cover my confusion, I gazed soulfully down at Cameron and started to quietly hum the theme from *Titanic*.

He raised an eyebrow. “Just so you know, if this boat goes down, I get the floating door.” We both laughed.

“Perfect!” announced the photographer, jolting me back into the moment. “Just a few more.”

After more than what anyone would describe as “a few,” Maggie handed us the welcome packet with directions to the cabin. “Your itinerary is in the first folder. Be sure to check in for the newlywed experiences, and have a great cruise!”

Cameron was frowning at the map, and I peered at it over his shoulder. The ship was almost literally a floating city, with four restaurants, a shopping mall, a movie theatre and an arcade – in addition to the two sun deck areas, one with a huge pool with waterslides and one with a smaller adults-only pool and multiple hot tubs. Our inside cabin had no view, but on the other hand we were in the center section near the water line where we’d be unlikely to get seasick. That booking had been for Cammie’s sake, but since neither Cameron nor I had been on a big cruise before it was still a good precaution.

Cameron finally figured out the route, and he led the way down into the ship. Our cabin turned out to be on a special concierge corridor for all the newlyweds that had signed up for the special deal. A couple still in wedding attire was talking to one of the concierges about scheduling a couples’ massage in their room. The woman’s dress was nearly blocking the hallway that led to our cabin, but Cameron picked up his rolling suitcase and gingerly guided us around her lace train.

The cabin itself was a mini-suite, with a tiny sitting area and only one bed – queen-sized. Quarters were going to be cramped. Our bags were already waiting in the room, and Cameron made a beeline to his while I plopped down on the couch. The couch, like all the rest of the furniture in the room, seemed to be sized at three-quarters scale; I felt like a giant.

Cameron hung up his suit and transferred the rest of his clothing into drawers. Then he did the same with my bag.

“I’m going to drop our tuxes with the concierge to be cleaned. I’ll be right back.”

“Tuxes? Why do we need tuxes?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Wednesday is formal dining. Didn’t you read the information packet?”

“Of course I did. But I was more focused on fun in the sun, not some stupid dress code.”

"Well, humor me, please. We're probably going to get a fair bit of attention, so we should look our best."

Cameron had always been better about paying attention to social details, so of course I'd defer to him. But I couldn't help teasing a little. "You just loved dressing me up in a tux, admit it. That's why you were so eager to pick out everybody's tuxes for the wedding." His choices had been fantastic, but I wasn't about to mention that.

Cameron's eyes flashed and his cheeks burned momentarily, before he grinned and shrugged. "Well, you do make a very pretty Ken doll." Abruptly, he sped out the door.

Had that flash of heat always been there? Or was I imagining it there now? My groin was definitely telling me it was there and that we should do something about it, but I knew better (most of the time) than to listen to the crazier desires of my lower head. I suspected they were to become even crazier on this trip, given the suggestive circumstances and lack of other options. I decided to examine the problem head on.

I wanted to have sex with my best friend. Who was also a guy. What were the pros and cons?

Pros: Sex was fun. I'd never been with a guy before, and I loved trying new things. If I didn't get some sort of relief on this trip I might combust.

Cons: Cameron was my friend, and sex could make things weird between us. I wasn't sure if he was interested. I'd already pushed him inappropriately, and the last thing I'd ever wanted to do was hurt him.

Put that way, my plan was obvious. First, I needed to figure out if Cameron was interested in having sex with me. If so, then we should plunge into the great gay experimental honeymoon – no, make that the *majestic* gay experimental honeymoon. After all, I really should get this out of my system while I was still young.

Cameron returned while I was pondering the logistics of seduction and the possibility of gay porn being available on board. "They'll have them dry cleaned by tomorrow, in plenty of time for dinner."

I glanced over at him, trying to determine if he might be interested in a little fling. With girls it was easy to tell, by the way the stood and touched their hair and laughed. I'd never understood how anyone got confused, but some guys were just clueless and couldn't tell the difference between a "go away" smile and a "let's have sex" smile, much less anything subtler.

But Cameron didn't do any of those things; he was just Cameron. I tried to remember how he acted with dates, although it had been several months since he'd last introduced a guy to me. I did

know Cam was awfully picky for a gay dude. He did the hookup app thing in college but soon got tired of all the skeevy guys. Would he even find me attractive? Most of the men he went out with didn't look like me. They'd all had light hair, except for one Asian dude he'd dated for a few weeks three or four years ago. Maybe I just wasn't his type.

Picturing him as a sexual partner was even less productive. I'd felt an occasional spark of attraction to a guy before, but it was like there was a glass wall in my brain that didn't allow my thoughts to go any further down that path. Now I was allowing myself to go there and – wow. I pictured myself kissing Cameron again, for real this time, with no trouble whatsoever. The image of him naked, and on top of me, skin to skin...damn, I needed to calm down *now*. Cameron was looking at me expectantly, as if waiting for me to say something.

The ship's horn sounded, loud even from where we were below deck.

"Hey, sounds like we're casting off!" I remarked cheerily, glad for the interruption. "Let's go on deck and wave goodbye to Miami!" Hopefully the distraction would take care of my erection.

Cameron smirked, and my stomach twisted strangely. "We hardly had a chance to say hello to it."

"Yeah, I was really looking forward to trying out that Magnum place Ramone and you were talking about. Maybe when we get back."

Had I just asked Cam to take me to a gay bar? Well, why not? It would all be part of the fabulous fake gay married experience. Cameron was giving me a peculiar look again, like he was trying to figure me out.

"Or maybe we can find someplace like that in Cozumel. New experiences at all that." Now I was just babbling. I decided to cut my losses and just head out the door. After a moment, I heard Cameron's footsteps behind me.

We weren't the only ones headed on deck, and we joined the steady stream of passengers that flowed down the corridors – all couples, of course. We were the only pair of guys, although I did spot a lesbian couple walking arm-in-arm. Competition for the title of first gay *Majestic* Love Cruise Newlywed couple? I slowed down and reached my hand back for Cameron's, and I pulled him up beside me. I kept hold of his hand as we walked, squeezing it a little for reassurance. "I'm so glad you said 'yes' to me," I said.

He squeezed back. "Anytime, buddy."

That wasn't very romantic, but probably good enough for anyone on the crew who might be theoretically policing the

newlyweds, looking for fakes. My body tingled pleasantly at the constant warmth of his hand, and it was then that I realized that it wasn't just sex that I'd been missing out this past month. Just touching another person intimately after weeks of frantic preparations and overwork felt good.

As we emerged into the warm evening breeze on deck, I inhaled deeply the sharp salt air. Getting away from it all was just what I needed. The ship was already pulling away from port, and I felt as though all the tension and worry I'd been lugging around for weeks now was being left behind on shore.

Cameron and I squeezed into a spot at the railing, and we stood there watching the city recede. The sky was darkening, and the city skyline glimmered brilliantly in the twilight. I let go of Cameron's hand and wrapped my arm around his waist. After a brief hesitation, he mirrored my action. I looked down below us at the turbulent waves illuminated by the ship's lights. Their agitation matched my own churning stomach; I felt both excited and scared. I was really going to do this. I was going to have sex with my best friend. How could I *not* go for it? This trip was ready-made for seduction, and I knew that if I chickened out on the great gay experiment I'd greatly regret it later when I finally did settle down for good.

Now all I had to do was convince Cameron.

Chapter 3

Cameron

Standing with Brad's arm around my waist as we watched the sun set over the receding Miami skyline felt heavenly. But what the heck did it mean? Was Brad just getting into the role of fake newlywed? Or was he interested in trying to make the marriage real? Even ignoring the alcohol, the fact that Brad had hit on me last night could've started something in his mind. Or maybe getting dumped by Cammie might have had him rethinking his life. Brad had gone through a lot of girlfriends before finding one who with whom he could imagine sharing his life. With Cammie off the menu, was he rethinking his sexuality?

Of course, the most likely scenario was that it was just wishful thinking. I'd been pining after Brad so long it had warped my brain. That was the logical explanation.

But what if it was true? What if Brad really was interested? I wasn't a fan of being anyone's first gay experience; that was just a recipe for panic, or violent regrets. Definitely not worth the hassle.

Except this was Brad, probably the guy least likely to freak out. Hell, he'd been willing to pose as a gay honeymooner just to get us into this situation, hadn't he? I doubted very much that touching another guy's dick would set him off…even if the thought of him touching *my* dick was enough to set *me* off. Argh.

The crowd on the deck was breaking up as the sun disappeared over the horizon. Brad turned to me, his arm still around my waist. I looked into his eyes and waited for him to make his next move.

He hesitated a long moment before speaking, "Listen, you want to go check out the video game room? It's been forever since I whipped you in Mario Kart!"

I had to laugh. "Sure, dude. Rainbow Road, here we come!"

I knew I was imagining things.

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The video game room turned out to be a bust, overrun by raucous teenagers hogging all the games (few of which were any good anyway). Instead, we strolled through the shopping plaza on the promenade deck, pointing out to each other all the ridiculous

merchandise for sale. I even had to stop Brad from buying a gigantic straw hat that would never have fit in our tiny cabin.

We reached the end of the plaza and strolled down to the swimming pools. The family pool was already filled with screaming kids, but the adults-only area was tranquil, brilliantly illuminated by underwater lights beneath the darkening sky. We returned to our room to change. Determined not to let things get weird, I stripped off my shirt as soon as we got inside and crossed the room quickly to grab my trunks

"Dude! When did you get so ripped!" shouted Brad. He came up behind me and ran a hand across my stomach.

My skin twitched under his touch, and I had to step away to catch my breath. Straight guys were so weird about touching. I was always careful to keep my hands and eyes to myself in the locker room, but straight guys were always smacking each other on the butt or talking about their dicks.

I did my best to focus on the question. "My new apartment building has an exercise room. I've been working out."

Truthfully, I'd been in desperate need of distraction when I moved out of Brad's apartment following the engagement. So much of my life had revolved around hanging out with Brad. Even after he started working at the law firm, there'd still been late night video game sessions and hours spent just shooting the breeze. We still got together after I moved out, but we had to plan for it, and so I was left with a lot more free time. I figured that getting in shape would make for a good distraction, and possibly help me find someone new to obsess over, someone who would be just as interested in me. Nothing may have come from my forays into the dating scene, and I'd never really bulk up, but feeling Brad trace the contours of my abs made me extremely glad that my efforts weren't entirely wasted.

"Well, that's amazing, buddy. Why didn't you tell me? We could've worked out together," Brad rambled on as he stripped down. He hadn't let his busier lifestyle keep him from staying in shape at all. I wrenched my eyes away with long practice; "no staring at my best friend's Adonis-like build" had become a firmly-cemented personal rule ever since we'd started shaving. I was still shivering at the memory of Brad's fingers on my stomach, and I wondered what he'd do if I copied his earlier action.

"I guess it was just something I had to do for myself. But maybe we can work out together on the ship? They're supposed to have a good set of equipment."

"Just like us," Brad remarked with a grin. I *really* didn't need to be thinking about Brad's equipment when I was wearing only a pair of swimming trunks.

"Last one in the pool is a rotten egg!" I yelled, rushing to the door. Maybe a dive in the pool was what I needed to calm down

"You're on!" He shouldered past me to the door, while I followed at his heels. Night had fully descended, clear and starlit, with Miami now only a faint glimmer of light on the horizon. We switched to a more sedate stride when we reached the deck, but we each kept subtly trying to push past the other to get to the pool first. An older man glowered at us as we brushed past though, so perhaps we weren't as subtle as I thought. I considered diverting to the family pool for a second, but Brad was pulling ahead so I hurried to catch up. Screw being on our best behavior; we were on vacation.

Brad broke into a run when we reached the pool deck, and I sprinted after him. I half expected to be halted by the shrill tweet of a lifeguard's whistle, a sound ingrained into my brain by a dozen summers spent with Brad at the neighborhood pool. This pool however had no lifeguard on duty, so after a moment's hesitation I took a running dive into the deep end just as Brad cannonballed in next to me. The water cascaded refreshingly against my outstretched body, and I swam down until I touched the bottom of the pool. I looked above me and noticed Brad treading water, so I grabbed both his ankles and yanked him downward. He grabbed at me in retaliation, and we both bobbed to the surface together, splashing and wrestling frantically. I finally broke away and swam to the edge of the pool.

As Brad made his way over to me, I aimed a splash at his face. "You're the rotten egg!" I shouted.

"Dude, you are clearly the rotten egg." Brad tried to splash me back, but I ducked. "I entered the pool area first."

"Yeah but I was in the water first. That's what counts."

"Does not."

"Does too."

Brad launched himself at me, obviously planning to dunk me, but I pushed off hard from the pool wall and evaded him. We were both strong swimmers, but he was fast enough so that we reached the shallow end at the same time. "Truce!" He called out, laughing and trying to catch his breath.

I was about to remind him of my exact words earlier, but then I realized that childish bickering probably did not constitute proper newlywed behavior. I did though splash him once more. "Truce!" I shouted before he had time to retaliate.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but would you take your horseplay elsewhere? I would like to swim some laps."

We looked up to see the same old guy who'd given us a disapproving glare on the deck standing beside the pool with his

hands on his hips. I was distracted by the impressive thatch of white hair on his chest, but I came to my senses in time to stop Brad from getting into an argument.

"No problem," I told him. "Brad, let's go hit the hot tub."

Brad reluctantly agreed, clearly still annoyed at being interrupted, and I led him to a nearby alcove paved in mosaic tile and sheltered from the main pool by several large planters. A pair of hot tubs waited invitingly for us.

"You know, we didn't have to leave. That dude had plenty of room for his laps. There's a lot of people on this ship. He's got to learn to share."

"Yeah, but it wasn't worth the hassle. We have ten days to play around in that pool. Plus, this is a sweet setup." I climbed into the tub, sighing as the hot water washed over my tired muscles. "Could you turn on the jets?"

"Sure thing."

Brad set the timer for the full twenty minutes. I sank deeper into the water, even more fully relaxed, as surges of warm, bubbly water rushed over me from all sides.

"I'm gonna grab a bottle of water, you want anything?" asked Brad.

"Grab me one, too. Thanks."

I was enjoying having a husband to fetch me things, even temporarily. The sound of giggling caught my attention, and I opened my eyes to the sight of two bikini-clad women entering the hot tub alcove.

"See, I promised you they'd be cute guys," a blonde girl in the hot pink bathing suit prodded in a stage whisper.

"Mmm hmm," replied her bronzed and metallic gold-clad friend. She slid into the hot tub beside me, and her long dark hair swirled in the bubbles. I quickly scooted over, but her friend slipped in on my other side.

"Hi, I'm Lacey," said the blonde one, "and this is Celeste. We were starting to worry that this boat was nothing but old folks, families with screaming kids, and newlyweds." Lacey rested her arm along the edge of the tub behind me. I shot away from them both, settling on the bench on other side of the tub. I was faced with two mock pouts.

"Sorry to disappoint you ladies, but I'm afraid I'm one of those newlyweds."

"Damn," snickered Celeste. "It was a last-minute booking for us, and we didn't think to check whether other singles would be on board."

"Well, it's a big ship," I said. "Chances are you'll find

someone if you keep looking."

Lacey's eyes were fixed on something behind me. "Hot damn, I think I see something right now. Celeste, take a look at that. Careful, though. It's like looking at the sun."

I turned around toward the alcove entrance. She was looking at Brad, of course, who had just returned with two water bottles.

I grinned. "Sorry again," I told them, scooting over to make room on the bench. "He's a newlywed too."

Lacey regarded Brad skeptically. "Seriously? Where'd you ditch your wives at?"

"We didn't," Brad replied, his voice rich with amusement. "Here you go, babe." He handed me one of the water bottles and pecked me on the cheek.

I could almost see the lightbulb go off over Lacey's head, and her look turned curious. "Oh. Oh!"

Celeste laughed. "Used to be that the good ones were either gay or married. Now it's both. Congratulations!"

"Thanks," said Brad, sidling closer and draping his arm around my shoulders.

I forced myself to relax against him. I couldn't help but reflect that the Brad I grew up with would've rather been between two beautiful girls in bikinis. Tonight, though, his attention remained entirely on me. I sternly scolded the nervous fluttering in my stomach; he was just playing a role.

"How long have you two been married?" asked Lacey.

"Let's see," replied Brad, "what time would it be in Vegas right now? I'd say it's been about twenty hours."

"Nineteen," I corrected, before biting my tongue. I wasn't going to allow myself to obsess over this fake marriage.

Lacey giggled. "Not even a full day!. You guys really are newlyweds."

"Yeah, but we've known each other since forever. We lived together for six years before I decided to propose," Brad explained.

I wasn't about to point out that those six years were spent as college roommates, with Brad in and out of relationships with numerous girls.

"Oh my God, you guys totally have to do the newlywed game tonight. At the big cruise kick-off party? Are you two signed up?"

Brad looked down at me, and I shook my head. I'd seen it on the itinerary, but as it wasn't one of the obligatory events it never occurred to me to sign us up.

"Oh, you should! It's open to all the newlyweds. It's a chance to show off how well you know each other." Lacey was smiling at us

like she'd been the one who'd arranged our marriage.

"Yeah, doesn't sound like our thing," I commented. I felt Brad shrug his shoulders.

"There's a thousand-dollar grand prize for the winner," Celeste added drily. "I was gonna ask Lacey if we could sign up just for the heck of it, but it's only for couples registered as newlyweds for the cruise."

Brad jerked to attention behind me, and an uneasy feeling gathered in the pit of my stomach. I sensed one of his hare-brained ideas bubbling beneath the surface.

"Dude, we could totally own that contest. No way any of the other couples know each other like we do. We could put the prize toward the big-screen TV fund!"

My stomach twisted again. We'd started the TV fund before Brad met Cammie, only to have the money he intended to spend on the TV go toward her engagement ring instead. That had been fine with me. Of course it had been fine. I knew that it had been time for me to move out anyway.

But did this mean that he expected me to move back in with him when we got back home to Chicago? I hadn't thought this plan through that far ahead. Could we be roommates again, like in the old days? I wasn't sure if I could go back to that life now, now that I'd always carry the memory of this cruise with me. as well as the expectation that Brad would eventually meet another woman like Cammie.

Brad was smiling intently at me, and I sternly reminded myself of my resolution to live in the moment. I was married to a gorgeous guy, and we would totally rock the newlywed game. I smiled at him; his own turned ecstatic. "Okay, let's do it. Why the hell not?"

I'd already agreed to one crazy scheme. Might as well go all out.

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"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the *Majestic* Love Cruise Newlywed game! We've chosen three couples at random from the dozens of newlyweds cruising with us this voyage. First, please welcome Bobby and Chelsea from Fort Wayne, Indiana!"

Brad and I were clustered offstage with the rest of the contestants, watching our host Johnny Parker from the wings. When they heard their names, the young Midwestern couple joined hands and walked to their seats. They smiled nervous at the polite applause from the vacationers that filled the hall, many of them lured to the event by free drink tickets.

"Next up, we have Nolan and Shawna from New York City!"

I had to wonder about the alleged random selection of couple, because as far as I could tell they'd chosen the only black couple and the only gay couple in the group of newlyweds that signed up for the contest. I glanced over at Brad, feeling unaccountably anxious. I didn't usually get stage fright, but pretending to be something we weren't in front of hundreds of people was an entirely different experience from giving a speech or singing (doggedly sober) karaoke.

"And finally, from Chicago, Illinois, let's give a warm round of applause for Brad and Cameron."

Brad grabbed my hand and guided me through the glare of the stage lights to our seat. I smiled and waved to the crowd, spotting Lacey and Celeste sitting at a table in the front with three guys. For their sakes I hoped their companions for the evening were neither married nor gay. The two women stood and cheered raucously for us, and I grinned and waved at them. We reached our pair of seats, and I noticed that the podium in front of the contestants concealed an electronic writing pad to project our answers onto the screen behind us, as well as two glasses of ice water.

I took a sip to calm my nerves. *Show time.*

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Chelsea, Shawna and I had been sent backstage to a soundproofed room while our husbands were asked the first round of questions. It was Chelsea's first cruise, and Shawna didn't hesitate to offer her advice.

"You want to save most of your money for Cozumel. They have some gorgeous jewelry, and you can get a really good deal on silver if you look. *Cinco Soles* is my favorite store; it has just about everything from tequila to batik dresses to jewelry. Definitely worth getting away from the booths that target the tourists by the dock."

"But is it safe?" wondered Chelsea, a little wide-eyed.

"Well, like any tourist town you have to watch out for pickpockets. If a crowd of children come up holding flowers, then watch out. But the town relies on the tourist trade, so it's safe enough. If you can handle New York or Chicago, you can handle San Miguel."

Chelsea laughed nervously. "Well, I've never been to New York or Chicago, so I might just stay in the tourist area."

Shawna and I exchanged a look, but we were saved from having to make further conversation by the production assistant telling us to return to the stage.

I sat down next to Brad, and he bobbed his head as if to say "We've got this, bro." Johnny Parker was going over the prizes again, including a $100 credit at the ship's overpriced stores just for playing.

He finished his spiel and launched into the second round.

Now it was time to see if Brad knew me as well as I knew him. “Okay, ladies and gentlemen,” announced Parker. “We’ll start the game off with an easy one. Where was your first kiss?”

“Are we talking body part or location?” asked Shawna, and raucous laughter filled the hall.

“Whichever way you think your spouse would answer,” replied Parker, wagging his eyebrows at the crowd.

I froze, because I wasn’t sure how Brad would answer that one. The obvious answer was Las Vegas, and the memory of the steamy kiss after our wedding had certainly been seared into my brain. But there was another possible answer as well, a memory that I had kept locked up, a cherished keepsake that I allowed myself to think about when I wanted to indulge in melancholy.

One hot summer day just before seventh grade, I visited Brad’s house for a barbecue. His mom wanted the two of us and Brad’s sister Grace out of the way while she got things ready, and so we’d climbed the old oak tree in the backyard. The branches were too high for Grace to reach, but that didn’t stop her from bothering us from the ground.

“Brad and Cameron, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” she’d jeered up us as we sat dangling our legs in one of the higher branches.

Instead of getting mad, though, Brad had just laughed at her. “Well, if you insist….” Just like that, he leaned down to kiss me lightly on the lips. His mouth was soft and warm, and I could taste the cinnamon gum he’d been chewing earlier. I could have sworn that I heard an actual choir of angels. The moment seemed like it would go on forever, until Grace freaked out and ran away screeching.

Brad laughed again at her retreating cries. “Well, that’s one way to get rid of her. Come on, let’s see if we can climb up as high up as the roof.”

Neither of us mentioned that kiss again, even a few years later when I came out, though it had certainly played a major role in confirming my sexuality for me. Obviously it hadn’t been the same for Brad, because one month later he became the first boy in our class to ask a girl out for a date. Hearing him excitedly describe the experience of asking out Meghan Portis and riding with her to the movies in the back of his mom’s SUV would be the preview to the dozens of first date stories he would share with me, even as I secretly wished that I could have taken those girls’ place.

Now, here I was. As far as the room was concerned, Brad had chosen me instead of those girls. But would he even remember that kiss? Both Shawna and Chelsea had responded with the correct answers, and now it was my turn. Play it safe, or take a chance? Brad

was looking at me encouragingly.

"It was in an oak tree, in Brad's backyard."

Brad's grin told me all I needed to know before his answer - *in the old oak tree* - flashed on the screen. Then his lips met mine, and I was back in that tree, with our warm breath mingling and the world spinning around me. Arousal coursed through my body, and I realized that I didn't care anymore about risking our friendship. If there was any chance in the world that this marriage could turn out to be the real thing, I'd be the biggest fool in the world not to take it.

***

Brad was whooping and cheering the instance we returned to the privacy of our cabin. "Say it with me, dude. *One. Thousand. Dollars*! Who's the best fricking pair of newlyweds on this boat?" .He held up both hands for a high-five.

"We are!" I shouted, slapping his palms.

"Damn right we are," and he pulled me in for a friendly hug.

Okay, enough messing around. If there was ever a time to go for it, this was it. I held on to the embrace, pulling Brad closer until our bodies touched properly. He did not pull away. "Brad," I started, and then paused.

"Yeah?"

"I couldn't help but notice that when you kissed me on the stage, it didn't feel pretend." He'd kissed me three times, once after the first question, once when I correctly guessed what last minute present I could always get him from the convenience store (lottery tickets), and once when we won the final speed round. I poured more and more of my heart into each one of those kisses, and now I felt ready to burst.

He looked uncertain. "Was that okay?"

I smiled at him, trying to appear confident. It came off shaky, though. "It was only okay if you're planning on doing it again, right now."

"Oh, thank God," he breathed, and then he put his mouth to mine.

Our kisses on stage had been intense, but they were nothing compared to the possessive, searing energy of this kiss. I happily yielded to his demanding lips, welcoming his tongue as it tasted mine. I stroked his cheek, and the texture of his stubble pressing into my fingertips shot directly to my groin. I moaned and deepened the kiss, riding a wave of desire born of years of repressed hunger. *Mine, mine, mine*, my heart sung. I pressed our bodies even closer, and I groaned loudly when I felt his erection throb against mine. Thank God, he *did* want this. He nibbled at my bottom lip before trailing his lips along

my jawline and down to my neck. My knees went weak as he planted wet, open-mouthed kisses under my ear, and my hands clutched frantically at the hem of his shirt. I lifted it so that I could press my hand against his warm skin, thrilling at the firm contours of his abdominal muscles. I didn't even notice that he was backing me up until he roughly shoved me against the door and pressed his body fully against mine. He broke off the kiss with a moan.

"God, you feel so good, Cam, please. This is so hot…please."

I answered by capturing his mouth again, thrusting my tongue inside and demanding his full attention. My hands continued to roam under his shirt, and I thrust my thigh between his legs. I rubbed against his hard cock, and he gasped and pulled back, panting.

"Say yes, please, Cameron. I need you to say yes. Nothing will change, I promise you. It's just for this trip and then we can be just friends again. Just say yes."

I felt like I'd been thrown into the cold ocean. *Nothing will change*. Brad wasn't looking for love. He wasn't thinking about making the marriage real. This was just his little gay experiment before he went back to his comfortable heterosexuality.

"No," I murmured, and he froze.

"No?" Brad pulled back, looking me fully in the face.

"That's what I said. No. I can't do this. I can't be your secret gay fling and then go back to being your best friend. I need more than that." I was starting to tear up. I needed to get out. I reached blindly behind me for the doorknob, and once I found it I tried to pull the door open.

Brad was blocking the way. "Cameron…."

"I said no," I repeated, more firmly this time. I pushed him back as I opened the door and rushed outside, shutting it behind me to discourage him from following. I hurried aimlessly down the corridor, determined to put as much of this stupid boat as I could between Brad and me.

It looked like risking our friendship was the wrong move to make.

Chapter 4

Brad

What the hell had just happened? I had been so sure that Cameron was getting into it, but then just like that he was gone. I quashed my impulse to run after him. Better to let him calm down first – better to let us both calm down, really. Until my throbbing arousal subsided, I probably wasn't going to be thinking too clearly anyway.

A cold shower helped to clear my lust-fogged brain, but it provided no answers for Cameron's bizarre behavior. I could've sworn everything had been green lights all around. Was gay sex that much different from straight sex? Did I break some sort of gay rule? I flopped back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling, not even bothering to wait to dry off. I tried to go over the scene in my head, but it only got me hot and bothered again.

Maybe Cam got caught up in the moment, and panicked. That was a depressing thought. I really didn't want to pressure him, but I also had no idea how we were going to get through this trip now. Whose stupid idea was this, anyhow? Oh, yeah: mine.

My phone chimed from the dresser. I couldn't think of anyone who'd be texting this hour except Cameron, so I hurried over to check. There were four text messages, all of them from Cammie. Three of them were sent earlier in the day. I'd been so wrapped up in hanging out with Cam that I hadn't even noticed. I was tempted to just delete them; the last thing I needed right now was drama from my ex-fiancée. Curiosity won me over, though.

Congratulations! Jerome gave me the news. Glad you finally married the right Cameron.

Sorry I missed the wedding. ;) You guys are going have to have one hell of a party when you get back home.

I told Jerome this would work. You guys have a great trip.

Don't worry, I'll have my stuff cleared out before you get back. You love birds deserve some space.

What. *What?* I read the messages again. *I told Jerome this would work.* Was she kidding me? Was she saying she set this whole thing up? And Jerome knew? I thought back to that drunken night, when I had decided to marry Cameron so we could go on this trip. Had Jerome actually been the one to suggest the idea? He'd certainly been paying close attention the conversation carefully, but he was always like that.

I checked the time again. Assuming Cammie was still at her mom's place in Austin – or even back in Chicago, if she'd been lying about flying back to Texas – it would be just after midnight for her. To hell with the roaming charges; I was going to call her.

She answered after the third ring. "Hey you, how's the Caribbean?" She sounded relaxed and faintly amused, and that infuriated me.

"Don't you 'hey you' me, Cammie. I just got your texts. What the hell?"

"What do you mean?"

I strode over to the bed and plopped down. "I *mean,* did you just dump me in some elaborate scheme to set me up with Cameron?"

"No, of course not! I dumped you because one too many people joked that you were marrying the wrong Cameron, and I realized it was true. You're a great guy, Brad, but no one wants to be a substitute bride, especially since there's nothing stopping you from marrying your soulmate."

I closed my eyes and bit back a groan. "But you and Jerome actually did set this whole honeymoon thing up."

She laughed. "Well, I'll admit that the timing was calculated to help nudge you two along. I figured you'd keep finding reasons not to get together with him."

"You mean besides the fact I'm not gay?"

She snorted. "Yeah, like anyone who drools over Greek wrestling is totally straight." Now that was totally unfair. It's a classic sport. "Not to mention the way you kept asking me to peg you."

I did my best to sound affronted. "An interest in anal intercourse doesn't have to mean you're gay. Plenty of straight guys have an adventurous side to them."

"Uh huh. And was it as fun as you imagined?"

I huffed. "I wouldn't know."

"Are you saying that the two of you haven't done the deed yet?"

"He's not interested," I muttered.

There was a long silence before she spoke again. "Brad, I'm saying this with love, but you're an idiot. He's *totally* interested. Trust me. All you have to do is ask him, and he'll be happy to lead you

down the rainbow path."

"No, Cammie. He's not interested. I did ask, he said no, and now everything is messed up."

"No way. You screwed something up. Tell me exactly what happened."

Tell my ex-fiancée that my current fake husband didn't want to have anything to do with me sexually? Well, it wasn't like things could get any stranger. I told her the whole story: our goofy *Star Wars* wedding, my drunken pass at him on what was supposed to be my wedding night, our experience in the hot tub, the newlywed game, and then my not-so-drunken-pass.

"I kept reassuring him that nothing would change, we would still be best friends – "

"Hold it," she interrupted. "What was that last part?"

"That we'd still be best friends?"

She sighed loudly. "No, before that."

"That nothing would change. That everything would go back to normal when we got home."

"Seriously? Did you really tell the man who's been in love with you since you were kids, the man who agreed to marry you, that you just wanted him for a booty call? Brad, what's wrong with you? You really are an idiot."

How the hell did *I* end up defending myself? I wasn't the one who'd dumped my fiancé at the altar. I wasn't the one who'd manipulated two people I cared about in some bizarre scheme to get them together. Come to think of it, why *did* Jerome buy into this anyway? This whole thing was awfully suspicious. "Cammie, tell me the truth. Did you and Jerome hook up?"

"Don't change the subject. Focus on what's important, here."

No denial, then. "Are you saying my fiancée hooking up with one of my groomsmen isn't important?"

"Not when we're talking about the fact you've been hurting Cameron. Stop deflecting."

I closed my eyes. Hurting Cameron was the very last thing I wanted. But Cammie couldn't have been right…could she? Was Cameron in love with me? A queasy feeling was gnawing at my stomach.

"Brad? You still there?"

"Yeah. Cammie, what should I do? I don't want to hurt him."

"Then don't. Is it really so impossible to imagine – staying married to him? Spending the rest of your life with Cameron?"

My thumb fiddled with the gold band on my finger, which I'd unthinkingly slipped back on after my shower. Why did the symbol of my fake marriage feel so comfortable on my finger? I tried to

imagine life married to Cameron. What would it mean, exactly? Making a home together, becoming roommates forever. I really missed being able to hang out with him at random times. But now that we were married I could also bring him to events like office holiday parties, family reunions, and weddings. How awesome would it be to have him at my back for those? We shared the same interests, the same sense of humor, and a tolerance for each other's quirks. We couldn't have children, though, but I wasn't in a rush for that. I guess we could adopt, or maybe we could just get a dog. It was a life all too easy to imagine.

"Brad?"

"No, it doesn't sound impossible. But I've screwed it up, Cammie. What do I do now?"

"What do you think? Apologize, and show him you know how to woo him. Like when we first met – you certainly had the moves then."

I laughed in spite of the situation. "Actually, most of the things I did to impress you back then were Cameron's suggestions."

"I should've known," she said. "Okay, tiger, let's make a plan to win back your guy."

***

The first step was to find Cameron. The *Majestic* was a big ship, but now that I'd remembered my cell phone I could use my secret weapon. Cameron's phone GPS was programmed into my own, a habit I picked up after the night he snuck off to a club and worried me half to death. According to the tracking app, he was on the stern of the ship: perfect. It was time to romance the hell out of my husband.

A proper romantic plan required consultation with the crew. Luckily, the concierge desk was staffed twenty-four hours a day. The young man at the desk – Martin according to his name tag – smiled brightly as I approached, the image of perfect customer service.

"How may I be of assistance today?"

"Did you happen to see an upset-looking man race past a little while ago?"

"I believe so. Is there an issue?" he asked a little warily.

I sighed. "He's my husband, and the issue is that I screwed up. Badly. I was wondering if you could possibly help me with a plan to fix things."

His expression remained carefully neutral. "Did you cheat on him?" There was absolutely no hint of censure in his tone, but his disapproval was still palpable.

"No. No! I wouldn't! It's just that I did something that makes him think I'm not taking our marriage seriously, that it's just a joke.

So I want to woo him back in the most romantic way possible. I know that my timing is crap, but are there any arrangements that can be made right away for flowers and stuff?"

Martin's answering smile was decidedly genuine. "Sir, if you have enough funds, I can wake up the orchestra and arrange for an accompanied serenade."

I smiled back. "Maybe just a string quartet?"

We settled on a single violin. I hoped that Martin was waking up the musician most likely to support my efforts, or at least the one most motivated by money. I had thought about buying a huge bouquet of apology flowers, but we decided that a single red rose would be more elegant. Martin went personally to retrieve one from the florist's workshop. "Best of luck, Mr. Taylor," he told me, handing me the single bloom. "Everything should be set."

"Thanks, Martin. You're a lifesaver." I set off for the rear of the ship. The moon had risen, bathing the deck in a soft, almost magical glow. The faintest shimmer on the horizon indicated that we must have been nearing our next port in the Bahamas. There were only few other people strolling about at this late hour, even though privacy wasn't my biggest priority. Hell, more people would make for a grander gesture. I spotted Cameron at the back railing, his back toward me as he gazed down at the ship's churning wake under the moonlight. I took a deep breath and gripped the waxed stem of the flower tightly.

"Hey there," I called softly. His shoulders tensed and he didn't turn around, and my stomach dropped. Maybe I should have given him some time? No, I had to do this now, now that I'd decided that I had to do to this – had to save this marriage.

"Brad, I'm sorry," he murmured, sounding exhausted.

I walked up and put a hand on his shoulder. "No, it's me that's sorry. I've been an idiot. Can you forgive me?"

He turned and glanced down at the rose in confusion. I held it out for him to take, but he just stared at it.

"Forgive you for what?"

"For not seeing what's right in front of me. Cameron, you're the most important person in my life, and you always have been. You've always been there for me, and I've taken that for granted."

He stepped forward, his face downcast. "No, you're the one that's always been there for me."

"We've been there for each other, which is why it was stupid of me not to see how perfect it would be to spend the rest of my life as your husband. Things are just so easy with you that I couldn't see it. I thought love was something you had to fight for, something that was hard work. But the truth is that I love you, man. I mean, I really love

you. Not just saying that."

He was trembling slightly, and his eyes watered. I bent down on one knee and held out the rose. "Cameron, would you do me the very great honor of being my husband for the rest of our lives?"

Cameron remained silent and motionless for what felt like a lifetime. At last, he reached out for the flower with an unsteady hand.

"Are you sure?" His voice was rough with unshed tears.

I stood up and took him into my arms. "I have never been more sure of anything in my life."

He hugged me back, tightly. "Then yes, of course. Of course yes!"

I kissed him fiercely, pouring into it everything I'd said and didn't say. He clung to me as if he were worried about being swept away.

When we finally came up for air, I spotted the violinist standing a few feet from us. I stepped back half a pace, placed one hand on Cameron's waist, and took his hand in the other. "May I have this dance?"

He looked over at the violinist and burst out laughing. "Holy cow, you really did go all out. But don't tell me he's going to play the theme from *Titanic*."

I nodded at the violinist, and he began playing. Cameron froze as he listened to the opening strains. "Is that?"

"I figure it was sort of our first date."

"We were six years old."

The violinist had made some adjustments to the score, but we could still clearly make out the familiar melody of the love song from *Beauty and the Beast*.

"And I remember it like it was yesterday. You were so scared of Gaston, and so sad when it looked like the Beast died. I wanted to make it all better for you. I still do. Shall we dance?"

Cameron laughed again, but he allowed me to lead him into a waltz. "But we have our roles mixed up. You're the one who should be Belle."

I twirled him gently, swinging him out and then pulling him back into my arms. He fit there perfectly. "No, you are most definitely Belle. Smart, courageous, loyal. Beautiful."

I pulled him closer as the song reached its end, and he looked me straight in the face with unmistakable love and adoration – and a little amusement. "Let's both agree to be Belle then. No point in getting twisted up over who's who."

A small crowd had gathered as we'd danced, and they now broke out into a smattering of polite applause. Cameron ducked his head in embarrassment, but I gave our audience a little bow before

drawing Cameron along with me to thank the violinist. I took Cameron's arm in mine, and we strolled along the edge of the rail.

He held the rose up to his nose and inhaled deeply, smiling brilliantly. "It's not a magic rose?"

"It is if it helped you to forgive me."

"Of course I forgive you. There's really nothing to forgive, you know. I mean, you don't need to do this just for us to be friends."

I snorted. "I'm doing this because it's an awesome idea. Honestly I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner."

"Because you're straight?"

"-ish," I corrected. "Really, I've never been picky. You know that,"

"Gee, thanks."

"You know what I mean. I've never had a particular type like some guys do. All my partners have been fun. I don't see how the fact you have a penis should make a difference."

Cameron stopped in his tracks and looked over at me. "But it does make a difference. Or it could. What if it turns out that we're totally incompatible?"

Instead of answering, I kissed him slow and sweetly. He melted into my arms and moaned a little as I sucked at his bottom lip and trailed kisses along his jaw.

"I don't think that's going to be a problem," I breathed into his ear, and I pressed my body against his so he could feel my arousal.

After a moment, he pulled back. "But what if it is?"

"Then we'll work on it. I suggest we go back to the cabin and get started. What do you think?"

I had no idea what he was searching for in my face, but he seemed to find it. "Okay," he replied, smiling again.

"Awesome!"

I repressed my impulse to grab his hand and sprint for the cabin. I couldn't risk scaring him away again. All I had to do now was convince him that I was one-hundred percent into the whole gay experience.

Chapter 5

Cameron

I was dreaming; there was no other explanation. Brad had told me that he loved me, and had given me a rose. We had waltzed to violin music in the moonlight. We were now walking hand in hand back to our cabin, where he fully intended that we would have sex.

And then he would decide if gay sex was something he enjoyed enough to stay married to me. No pressure.

The concierge on our deck smiled at us warmly, which struck me as odd at this late hour. Brad opened our door – in my haste to leave earlier I'd completely forgotten my key card – and we tumbled into the room. Then Brad's arms were around me and his mouth on mine again, and it was glorious.

Soon though the press of lips was no longer enough to satisfy me. I needed to touch him. My hand slipped under his shirt and slid across his stomach. We had a brief moment of confusion as we got tangled in our frantic rush to get each other's shirts off, but at last we figured it out.

I fell to my knees and fumbled with his belt. He reached down in a furtive attempt to help me, but I brushed him away. I freed his dick and palmed the gloriously warm length. I'd peeked at it before, of course; I'm only human. But I'd never beheld it like this, up close. The musk of his arousal intoxicated me, and I was determined that nothing was going to stop me from tasting him.

"Cam, Cam, no, you don't have to. I want you in my bed."

"I want you in my mouth," I replied shortly, and with no more hesitation I sucked him in deep.

He groaned and tangled his hand in my hair, and I voiced my appreciation by taking him in so deep that he brushed against the back of my throat. My tongue felt for the sensitive vein along his engorged shaft. He shuddered from head to toe, and so I tongued that spot again and again in quick succession. The hand in my hair tightened and I sucked harder, loving the feel of him stretching my mouth.

Suddenly he pulled my head back until I slid off with a wet popping sound. "Oh God, I'm too close. Bed – please Cameron. I want us in the bed."

I couldn't argue with that sentiment. I stood up carefully, though even so the pounding of my heart was making me so dizzy that

my head spun. Then I saw that Brad had stripped off his pants, shoes, and socks, and I became even dizzier. He was truly a perfect specimen, and now I was allowed to look all I wanted. He took me by my hand and led me over to the bed. I sat down, and now he was the one kneeling before me, easing off my shoes and socks and pulling off my pants.

"Brad, you don't have to…."

He shushed me. "I want to."

He licked my shaft in a long, slow swipe before lowering his mouth onto my erection. What he may have lacked in finesse he more than made up for with enthusiasm. Anyway, this was *Brad*. He glanced quickly up at me with those blue eyes, and I had to grab the base of my cock to keep from coming right there.

"I'm close…I'm close."

He pulled off and looked up at me. "We can't have that. I want you to come inside me."

I frowned. "Brad, you really don't have to do that. You don't have anything to prove. Lots of guys don't bottom. Some couples don't even have penetrative sex at all. It's fine."

"Is that your way of saying you don't top?" Brad asked slyly.

I felt my face reddening. We were actually having this conversation. "No, I'm a versatile guy. I'm just saying you shouldn't feel you need to jump straight into the deep end."

Then just like that he surged atop me and pressed me back onto the bed. He trailed his lips over my abs and stroked my sides, and I moaned and arched into his mouth and the delicious friction of his stubble. He worked his way slowly up my chest and neck until he reached my ear. "No, it's you that needs to plunge into the deep end," he whispered.

I burst out laughing. "Brad, that is the cheesiest thing I ever heard you say. And that's saying something."

He grinned widely down at me. "I aim to please. So would you please get inside me now?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Uh huh. And where's the lube?"

"Um, can't you just use spit or something?"

I wanted to laugh at his confused expression, but instead I sighed and rolled my eyes. "No, I can't just use spit or something. Seriously, haven't you ever done anal before?"

"No. Cammie wasn't interested at all; she wouldn't even try pegging me. And I was never with anyone else long enough to bring it up. I guess I could talk to the concierge. He's a helpful dude…."

I fixed him with my most serious glare, and then I got up and walked over to my travel bag. I grabbed a strip of condoms and a bottle of water-based lube and tossed them onto the bed.

"Awesome!" he shouted, but then he frowned. "Wait a minute. You brought sex stuff on our fake honeymoon? Were you planning on getting lucky?"

"No, I brought sex stuff to Las Vegas, and I was figuring I might get lucky at your wedding."

He grinned and pulled me back onto the bed. "Which you totally did."

I smiled. "Yeah, I totally did."

We kissed again. I was rock hard, but I felt no urgency. I enjoyed just lying in Brad's arms, leisurely tasting his mouth and chasing his tongue with mine. Then the tips of his fingers lightly stroked my cock, and I shivered.

"You feel so good, Cam," he whispered against my lips. "Please, I want you. Don't make me beg, man. Unless you're into that...."

I snorted. "No, I'm not into that. Which is good, 'cause you'd make a sorry-ass submissive."

"Well, I'd be willing to give it a try. I'd be willing to give anything a try once. Come on, how can I get you in me?"

"You're definitely a bossy bottom, that's for sure. It's easiest if you're on your hands and knees."

"But I want to see your face. Can we do that?"

I bit back another comment about power bottoms. I still wondered if he was insisting on doing this only to prove himself to me, but I wasn't going to argue any more. In truth, I was squirming pleasantly inside at the idea of being the first person inside him like that. It was an intimacy I'd never even allowed myself to imagine.

"Yeah, we can do that. Pass me that pillow."

I maneuvered the pillow under his hips, and my eyes hungrily feasted on the exquisite sight before them. My hand shook as I uncapped the lube and poured it into my hand. "I'm going to press in, just a little," I told him, sounding more confident than I felt. I really needed this to be good for him.

His whole body shivered as I circled his opening with the tip of one finger, and when I dipped down to brush over the sweet spot just behind his testicles he whimpered.

"That's it; relax. I'm going to press in a little deeper."

My slicked-up fingers slid into his warmth. I rotated them gently inside, slowly stretching him from all angles.

"Remember to breathe," I instructed, though when he did his breaths came out haggard with arousal. "How are you doing?"

"Good. Fine. It doesn't hurt – just feels a little weird."

I eased in another finger and then bent all three, watching Brad's face carefully all the while. After a moment his eyes snapped

open. “Dude, that’s, that’s….”

“That’s your prostate,” I finished, crooking my fingers again in the same spot.

“Oh God, that feels so good. Holy cow, no wonder guys do this. More! Again!”

I obliged. He moaned and squirmed as my strokes came faster, and he threw an arm across his face. I looked down at his heaving chest, gleaming with a sheen of sweat, and suddenly I knew I couldn’t wait any longer. I yanked out my fingers and fumbled for the still-wrapped condom, ignoring his disappointed moan. The wrapper slipped in my lubricated grip, and finally I gave up and tore it open with my teeth. Brad watched with dark, half-lidded eyes as I rolled the condom on with shaking hands. I crawled up between his legs and positioned myself at his entrance.

“Are you sure, Brad?” I asked one last time, looking directly into his eyes. He promptly rolled them at me.

“I couldn’t be more sure. Come on, fuck me now!”

Thank God he said that, because I would have probably cried if he’d backed out. I slowly pushed in, and I felt him tense around me. I paused. “Remember to breathe. And bear down; that helps. If it hurts, tell me.”

Brad wrapped his legs around me, trying to shove me in deeper. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

Needing no further encouragement, I buried myself fully inside him. I paused and I watched him gasp and catch his breath, and then I started thrusting. He felt more glorious than I could have ever imagined – so hot, so tight, and so eager for me. I gazed down into his eyes as they fluttered shut. He threw his head back and moaned in time with my thrusts. I had unconsciously sped up, my body knowing that I wouldn’t last much longer. I lifted up his knees to allow myself to push in even deeper, and with a grunt I indicated to him to hold them in place. My slicked-up hand pumped him messily.

“I’m going to...I’m so close,” he grit out between guttural moans.

“Yeah, that’s it, sweetheart, come for me. I want to see it.” I brushed my thumb across the head of his cock, and he spasmed and wailed. My hand released him as he spurted all over our chests, and only a few seconds later the tight clenching of his muscles launched me into my orgasm. Everything vanished into a haze of pleasure; I regained awareness collapsed onto Brad’s heaving chest, utterly spent. I summoned enough rational thought to slip out, tie off the condom, and toss it to the side, all before throwing myself back into his waiting arms.

He was laughing softly. “Okay, I’m going to call it. Sex is

gonna be absolutely no problem. Damn, to think we could've been doing that all along!"

I giggled against his neck, feeling giddy. Just before I slipped off into sleep, I felt his lips brush the top of my head.

***

I was in the bed alone when I woke the next morning, and for a moment I wondered if last night really had been all a dream. Then Brad emerged from the bathroom with wet hair and wearing nothing but a towel slung low around his hips. It was a sight I'd seen a hundred times, but this time I shamelessly allowed myself to stare.

Judging by his smile, Brad enjoyed it, too. "Hey there, sleepyhead. How you doing?"

"Fantastic. And you?"

"Sore, but in the best of ways." He dropped his towel and crawled across the bed to give me a thorough wake-up kiss. I pulled away when I tasted mint.

He frowned. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I replied, climbing out of bed. "Just wanted to brush my teeth."

He sighed and stretched out, his hands behind his head on the pillow. "Barely married two days and the romance is gone. We're an old married couple."

I used the toilet and scrubbed away my morning breath before hurrying back to bed. "Old married couple, huh? I like the sound of that." I nuzzled into the crook of his neck and murmured, "So I didn't dream it all. We really are married, for real?"

"Yup." He sounded satisfied.

"Mmm, I wonder how I'm going to break this news to my mom."

Brad shifted uneasily.

"What?"

"Um…she probably already knows."

I stared at him. "And how would she know?"

"I kinda posted the news on my Facebook."

"Show me."

He got his tablet and opened his Facebook page. Sure enough, he'd changed his relationship status to "married." But Mom would have just assumed it was Cammie, right? There was a post instructing friends to check out Brad's wedding page. I clicked on the link.

I had to stop myself from gasping. It was Brad and Cammie's page, but all her photos had been replaced by photos of Brad and me. There was a shot of us from yesterday in front of the distant Miami

skyline, and one of us receiving the prize in the newlywed contest. There was even the video from the wedding itself, fake robot attendants and all. And – oh God –there was the picture Jerome had snapped of Brad's drunken proposal, the near-empty wine bottle in his hand clearly visible.

But that wasn't the half of it. There were other photos of us, from childhood and college. In every one of them we looked happy and blissfully in love. The screen blurred as I blinked tears from my eyes. "How did – when did you do this?"

He cleared his throat. "It was actually Cammie who did the wedding page. Turns out she kinda was the one who set us up. Her and Jerome. The whole dumping me the day of the wedding was designed to get us on this cruise together."

An instant of jealousy jolted through me at the thought of Cammie being the one to put together *my* wedding page. Then the ridiculousness of the whole situation struck me, and I laughed instead.

"Seriously? That's the stupidest plan ever conceived."

Brad laughed too. "Hey, but it worked!"

I remembered he'd mentioned Jerome too. "You realize Jerome just did it to get a shot at Cammie?"

"Yeah, I kind of figured. But more power to them. No reason everyone can't end up happy, is there?"

Good point. I didn't really doubt Brad's commitment now, but it still wouldn't hurt if his ex-fiancée had already moved on. I was just about to make a witty retort about giving Brad another happy ending when the captain's voice boomed over the speaker.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we've arrived at Great Stirrup Cay. Please take this opportunity to enjoy the island. The ship will depart this evening at 6:00 p.m. Registered newlywed guests, please report to the Pareto Deck for the day's activities. Thank you."

Brad jumped up excitedly, totally ignoring his lack of clothes. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"What?"

"It's flyboard time!"

His enthusiasm was infectious. There would be enough time later for more sexual exploration – the rest of our lives, in fact.

Epilogue

Almost one year later

Cameron

"Dude, careful how you hold the screen! You're gonna crack it!" Brad yelled at Harold.

"I know how to pick up a TV," retorted Harold, but he still subtly shifted his grip. He and Brad carefully set the television on the entertainment stand.

"Wow, that really is big," I blurted. The eighty-inch screen hadn't looked so overwhelming in the store, but it would definitely a focal point of our living room.

"That's what she said," joked Stewart, who had just wandered in from the kitchen with a beer in hand.

"You mean, that's what *he* said." Brad's voice had dipped to a lower register, and he waggled his eyes suggestively. I blushed.

"That's what they all say," said Harold firmly. He pulled the protective film off the screen and stuffed it into the empty box.

Brad plugged in the television and switched it on. After a minute of fumbling through the set-up menus, he asked, "What's the wifi password?"

"It's in the kitchen; I'll get it." I kept meaning to change it to something I could remember, but never did. Brad came up with the idea to keep it posted on the refrigerator.

I came across Cammie putting the final touches on a seven-layer dip while Jerome chatted with her. It had taken me a while to get use to her visiting; at first I felt like a cat whose territory was being invaded. She and Jerome finally setting the date for their wedding really helped settle my unease.

"Are they almost ready?" she asked, handing the dish off to Jerome.

"Still setting up," I answered, grabbing the password sheet off the fridge. "Kick-off's not for another twenty minutes anyway."

I brought Brad the password, and he finished the set-up. Stewart and Harold had already grabbed the two comfy chairs, leaving the oversized couch to the couples. Jerome and Cammie set the chips and dip on the table and plopped down on one end of the couch, and I settled next to Brad at the other, but he abruptly stood up and walked

around the table to face the room nervously.

"We have some time before the game starts, so I thought this would be a good time to share this with you all. Cameron, I realize that our anniversary isn't until Wednesday, but I wanted to give this video to you now, while we have everyone here."

I stared at him warily, but didn't see any sign of a joke.

"A year ago, I knew I was about to begin a whole new adventure. Little did I know that adventure would end up being at the side of the man who always made me feel I could be myself. I really am the luckiest man on earth, and I just wanted to do something to show how I feel." He hit play, and then hurried back to my side.

The screen was blank for a moment, and then our names and our wedding date appeared. The violin music started, and I gasped quietly.

"How did you…?" I whispered.

"I paid him to record it in a studio. Now watch."

It was a slideshow of us, of course. First came pictures from our childhood, followed by the photos from our Las Vegas wedding. Then came our many honeymoon photos: Brad flying high on his flyboard, me swimming with the dolphins, both of us playing on the beach. Then back home in Chicago at the commitment ceremony my mom insisted on, surrounded by our families and friends. Me moving back in, and little details of our life together: birthday parties and our big Halloween bash, Thanksgiving shared between both families, Christmas together as husbands. Then our wedding video played and I watched us recite our vows and slide our rings on. I gripped his left hand hard with my own, looking at the pair of gleaming bands we both wore. Even after a year he'd never given me reason to think he regretted his commitment. He hugged me close and kissed the top of my head as we were pronounced spouses for life.

The end of the slideshow was a photo of us grinning on the cover of a special edition of *Majestic Love Cruise Newlywed Adventures!* The headline beneath us proudly proclaimed that "Best friends make the best husbands." As Brad bent down to kiss me, I knew with absolute certainty that truer words were never written.

~The End~

Enjoy this book? Try Devyn's recent release, Ace of Hearts, available exclusively on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.

Thanks for reading!

Thank you for reading *Honeymoon Hoax*. I hope you enjoyed it!

***

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Integrity

By Cait Forester

Chapter 1

"Wake up, lazy bones!"

Jackson Greene very nearly committed murder when his bed shifted violently and he woke to the weight of his roommate tipping him precariously toward the edge. Instead, he scrambled to catch himself before he rolled, clutching his blanket to his stomach at the same time to keep from exposing himself. "What? Fuck! Trevor, what the hell?"

Trevor shot him a wicked grin. "You overslept."

The haze of early morning, accentuated considerably by a late night—which had technically been only earlier in the morning—gripped Jackson's thoughts in gummy fingers and refused to let go quite yet. He glanced at the glowing red numerals on his cheap alarm clock. He could read them; he just couldn't make sense of them. He didn't have class until ten, did he?

"You took the TA appointment for Layton's British lit class," Trevor said.

The words slipped under the grip of exhaustion's fat knuckles and freed his mind. "Fuck me," Jackson groaned. "Get off, I have to shower."

"Were there periods or commas between those clauses?" Trevor asked innocently. "Because I don't think we have much time but I'm confident I can—"

Jackson hit him smartly with his pillow.

Once recovered, Trevor held his hands up in surrender. "I was just joking," he laughed. "Shower's free. Want me to get you some clothes?"

"Would you?" Jackson swung his legs off the side of the bed, careful to keep the blanket over his lap.

"Sure," Trevor said. But then he didn't get up.

Jackson cleared his throat.

"Oh," his roommate said slyly, "I'm sorry, did you sleep naked? My bad." He did get up and leave that time, even though he didn't seem to be in a great hurry about it.

Jackson watched him go and sighed to himself when the door closed. He and Trevor had never… done… anything. Not yet. Not that neither of them had ever wanted to. Trevor was a good looking guy, but he was a bit, well… dumb. Everything else about him was pretty much spot on; probably the sex would be great. Jackson just knew his

friend, knew what Trevor thought about sex, and knew it wasn't what Jackson wanted.

He pushed all of that out of his brain, though. He only had fifteen minutes to be out the door. It would take another fifteen to get to Chumbley Hall; ten if he sprinted half and recovered the second half of the way there.

The dorm apartment they were in had a shared bathroom that he used efficiently, the sort of shower meant to keep him from smelling like he hadn't showered and not much else. When he emerged, Trevor had, true to his word, left an outfit sitting out on his bed. Trevor might be a bit of a dumb jock, but he had good fashion sense. And at least he hadn't left something slutty out as a joke.

Jackson walked out of his room dressed, his messenger bag slung over his shoulder. Trevor was on the couch in the small living room, swiping through his phone, probably on Grindr or Tindr or some other app that didn't feel the need to waste a perfectly good 'e' on the end of its name. He didn't even bother to look up when he lifted a lidded metal cup up for Jackson to take as he passed.

"See you for lunch?" Trevor asked.

"Sure," Jackson said. He caught his coffee as he walked by, and nearly left without another word. Instead, however, he turned and leaned over the back of the couch to give Trevor a hug. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Trevor said. "And call your Gran when you get a chance!"

Right. It had been a few weeks since the last time he'd talked to her. He grunted an acknowledgement at Trevor on his way to the door. And then Jackson was out, down the stairs two at a time, and onto the long walkway toward the center of campus.

Rose State was about as beautiful a college campus as any other in the country. True to its name, there were roses planted along most of the walkways, separating pristine white concrete from lush green lawns. Already the student body was up and milling about for morning classes. He'd been here for six long years that were now, finally, almost at an end. He'd gotten his bachelor's in near record time, and was in his last term for a Master of Fine Arts in Literature.

In a way, it was sad. It was also scary, and exciting, and it provoked no small measure of near-crippling anxiety. On balance, it was a mixed prospect. What does one *do* with an MFA in literature?

Jackson's plan was to go on to get his Ph.D. in literature, specifically from Oxford. The application was already out, the visa was applied for, the various prayers had been made to pretty much any deity that was willing to help him out. All that was left now was to finish his classes, wait with bated breath, and try not to die of a stroke or heart attack in the meantime.

Getting up on time each morning would have been a good bit to add to the list as well.

He did sprint part of the journey—the middle—and by the time Jackson arrived at Chumbley Hall he was sweaty, and heaving, and his heart was still pounding painfully in his chest. But he had made it with two minutes to spare. Really, he should have been there ten minutes early—but he knew Professor Layton well enough that he probably didn't need his own orientation like some of the newer TA's did.

He used those two minutes to chug water from the fountain, chase it with half his coffee—which he'd forgotten about even though it was in his hand the whole time—and quickly wiped the sweat from his forehead and face. No one expected a TA to look nearly as dignified as a vaunted professor, especially not one like Layton with his classic spectacles, corduroy blazers, and endless supply of classy suede boots; but the least Jackson could do was not look like he'd come straight from the gym.

He paused and mussed with his hair a bit, combing it back with his fingers, and lamented at having gotten up too late to clean himself up properly. Then he gave a small grunt as he pushed through the heavy oak door into the Chumbley-Morgan auditorium.

He froze.

The door pounded shut behind him.

Maybe he was dreaming. Except he was dressed. If this had been a bad dream, he would have been naked.

He was in the wrong classroom. That was one explanation, at least. It was a good reason for him to turn around and leave, mumbling apologies. And he would have if he could have recovered more quickly from the shock that stuck his feet to the floor.

At the very least, he wasn't alone. So that was something.

The professor standing at the podium had looked up to see what intruder had barged in on his class, and he had gone stock-still as well. He was tall, dark hair longer than Jackson remembered, the wavy, curly nature of it more obvious now that it was nearly to his shoulders. He wore a cream blazer with brown elbow-patches, over jeans that suggested he was still in shape after all these years. Those smoldering dark eyes looked at Jackson over thin-rimmed glasses, black eyebrows both raised and tugged into a crease of concern.

"I'm…" Jackson started, and then simply turned to pull the door open. Layton would be furious.

"Jackson Greene?" The man at the podium asked. "You're in the right class."

Jackson turned. "Sorry," he said. "Um… I'm assisting Professor Layton in the British Lit class this term… so…"

“Of course,” the man said. “He’s taken sabbatical. So, I’m taking over for him for the term.” There was a beat, almost physical in the distance between them, like an awkward thump against the invisible threads that connected them. “I’m Professor Smith.”

He didn’t need to introduce himself. Then again, maybe he did. “Pleased to meet you,” Jackson said.

A class of around thirty were watching them intently. Or maybe they were just bored? It was impossible to say. It very much felt like they were staring. It felt like they knew exactly what was going on. It felt like they were judging him, just barely stifling laughter.

Jackson swallowed and it sounded too loud.

“You can have a seat, Mr. Greene,” Professor Smith said.

Startled out of his deer-in-the-headlights posture, Jackson muttered a barely coherent, “Right, right; of course,” and shuffled over to the TA’s desk. There were already stacks of handouts on it. The syllabus. Naturally. He was here to assist.

His fingers were numb as he scooped up the stack of papers and stood from the uncomfortable chair to begin passing them out.

Professor Smith cleared his throat. “Well, if you’ll all just take one of these and set it aside for now, we’ll cover the syllabus in a few moments. I planned to start with a bit of an introduction, since I know many of you were hoping to work with Professor Layton this term.”

Jackson quashed a groan of dismay, and ignored the heat in his cheeks. He was clearly on autopilot. That had to change. He had to get a hold of himself. The stranger he acted, the more obvious it was going to be that something was… off.

Once he was done, he went back to his desk and planted himself firmly in the chair behind it, there to remain until Professor Smith needed him.

“I doubt any of you know me,” Smith went on, “but I have until just recently only taught high school. I don’t see any of my former students here, but a few have come through Rose State.” Did his eyes flicker toward Jackson? Why? What was he thinking?

“I hold two PhD’s,” Smith went on. “The first I took in mid-century European literature. The second I pretty much invented: eighteenth century proto-genre literature. Fantasy, horror, science fiction. Not quite literary, but the two are wonderfully synergistic, and part of the focus of my class will be to show you the influences both early genre fiction and classical literary fiction had on one another. I think you’ll be surprised.”

Jackson listened, but only until his mind wandered. Maybe he could request a reassignment. Probably not. The whole point was to work with Layton, anyway, and by now, all the TA spots were filled.

And besides, what excuse was he going to use?

He couldn't very well tell the director of the English department that Professor Matthew Smith was his old high school teacher. Well, he *could*, he supposed.

But he certainly couldn't tell her that he and Professor Smith had had an affair in his senior year.

Chapter 2

Six years ago.

"Jackson, we really shouldn't be doing this."

Matt observed Jackson's slow approach. We're alone*, his brain told him. Maybe not the correct brain, but one with plenty of voting power at the moment. It reasoned that Jackson was eighteen, after all, and if he could vote and go to war he could make whatever other choices he wanted, right? And he was painfully beautiful. That pouty lower lip looked ready to devour him, and it had been so long since Robert.*

Matt could have stopped it. "I'm your teacher," he said. "This is inappropriate, Jackson."

"Then tell me to go away," Jackson muttered. It was so strange, seeing him like this. He'd been such a shy, bookish student until just the past week. Up until Matt had given him the speech about how Jackson needed to think about what he wanted instead of giving his life up to everyone else's demands of him. Well, that had been a mistake, hadn't it?

The words just wouldn't form. The boy was more than just beautiful—he was older than he should have been, matured by too much tragedy. He was brilliant, too. He didn't even belong in a public school like this.

Jackson closed the last of the distance between them and laid a hand on Matt's chest. "Just kiss me once," he said. "Please, Matt. Just once. I want my first kiss to mean something. I want it to be with someone who deserves it. Can I? Please?"

Jackson's plea was a spell that threaded into Matt's mind, into his stomach and down into his groin. It tugged his head forward and down. Once his lips met Jackson's, he knew it was all over.

It was a testament to Matt's composure that he didn't faint on stage in front of his students. His heart was hammering in his ears, so much that he could barely hear them when he opened the floor to questions about the syllabus or even about himself. He riveted his attention on his class and made sure that it stayed stuck there.

If he'd had any other TA, he might have acknowledged them more, lauded their accomplishments. He really should have for Jackson, too, so that the students that didn't know him would respect him. Those that did know him undoubtedly already did.

Jackson-fucking-Greene. When he'd read Tim Layton's notes on the upcoming class, 'young mister Greene' had been his title for Jackson. Tim was a stuffy old Brit who barely ever used a person's first name. Honestly, Matt had considered it for a moment… but the timing seemed off. Tim's TA was supposed to be a young man finishing his master's degree this term. Jackson should have had

another full year to go at least.

Then again, it was *Jackson*.

He felt the younger man's presence there in the room, a looming threat and an aching reminder. A bruise he'd forgotten he had. Not that his bruises were worse than Jackson's, but they did still smart. That masochistic desire to press it, to feel it hurt, just like with any other bruise, was already itching at the back of his mind.

But the best thing would be to keep it professional. Their affair had been a mistake. There was no telling what kind of damage he'd done to Jackson by indulging the boy's fantasy at the time. He hadn't seen him since graduation.

Six years. He still looked as ephemerally beautiful as he had then; some sort of fae creature from a storybook, only… more fully formed now. He was smartly dressed, so he'd gained some degree of fashion sense in the meantime. He'd… grown up. The same sharp features and intelligent blue eyes that had pinned him to the wall years ago—those hadn't changed a bit, though maybe they were a little harder—now burned the back of his shoulders.

Or at least he imagined they did. When he managed to cast Jackson a passing glance, Jackson was never actually looking at him. Probably he was furious. Maybe Matt could trade him off for someone else's TA. It was the right thing to do.

Once he finished his introductory speech, the class moved right along into their first assignment. "The first book on your syllabus is Sybil, or The Two Nations. Benjamin Disraeli. I want you to pay particular attention to the disparity between the rich and the poor depicted throughout the book. On Wednesday, we'll be discussing British social mores of the late nineteenth century, so feel free to do your own research ahead of time. Part of your grade in this class will have to do with participation in dialog throughout the term so please have something to say. Dissenting opinions are always welcome." It was a timely choice, given the political climate. His hope was that there would be some lively debate throughout the next two weeks.

Debate regarding the book and the politics it gave birth to, at any rate. More and more Matt felt a growing sense of impending confrontation.

"Do we have to purchase hard copies?" a student asked.

"There are twelve copies in the library," Jackson said. "They've been there for years and are a little dusty, but they should still be readable."

Matt glanced at his TA. Was there a hint of snark? Jackson had always thought that Victorian England gave birth to some of the soppiest literature ever to be written. His preference, in high school, had been mid-century works, especially those that came out of the two

world wars.

Now – as then – however, Matt was the instructor. It was his class, and they'd read the books he gave them because he had a plan. That plan didn't involve caving to Jackson's particular tastes.

"You're welcome to procure your copy however you can," Matt said. "As long as it's unabridged, it'll do fine. Don't just get the footnotes, though. I'll expect you all to answer questions that you will not find in any version—and I've read them all." He hadn't, of course, but it sold convincingly. A few of the students looked grim indeed. Well, no one told them it would be an easy class.

The rest of the lecture enumerated the many criticisms and praises of the book, as well as a bit of preliminary history of the times from whence it arose. The author, Disraeli, had gone on to be Prime Minister of Britain. He would wait to see who discovered that he hadn't ever managed to bring his particular ideology to fruition while in office. The students that looked for the impact of literature were the ones that had the most interest and passion for it.

When the class was over, he reminded them, again, to thoroughly look over the syllabus. "I shouldn't have to quiz you on your syllabus at this point," he told them as they began to get up and shuffle out of the room, "but I am by no means above it."

A chorus of groans and a dull patter of panicked whispers arose from the assembled mass of students as they trickled out of the room. Matt studied his copy of the syllabus carefully at his podium while they did. With a little luck, Jackson would leave with them.

Except luck had never been a quality Matt assigned to himself. Jackson, naturally, remained seated at his desk until the room was empty.

Matt shuffled papers. "Well, I think that went okay."

"What the fuck, Matt?" Jackson asked.

So, they were going to get right into it. Okay. Fair enough. "I didn't do it intentionally," Matt said.

Jackson rolled his eyes. "It's just some wild coincidence? There are literally thousands of colleges you might have picked up a gig at. You came to mine, and picked up the only class I'm assisting for, by accident?"

"You can think what you want," Matt said. He took his papers off the podium and transferred them to his leather satchel. "The world doesn't revolve around you, you know."

"I didn't think it did before," Jackson mused, "but now I'm not entirely sure."

They watched one another.

Matt sighed, breaking first. "Is it okay for me to say that it's good to see you?"

"I seriously doubt that." Jackson stood and gathered his bag. It was remarkably similar to Matt's. Jackson might have noticed, because he glanced down at his own and then shook his head slowly. "How is this going to work?"

"I can see if one of the other Lit instructors will trade me their TA," Matt offered.

Though he seemed to consider it, Jackson ultimately dismissed the idea. "No. There aren't that many and I need to TA this specific class. Layton was supposed to use it as the basis for my recommendation to Oxford."

"Oxford?" Matt shouldn't have been surprised. But he'd always imagined Jackson as more of a Cambridge scholar, if he was going to go that direction.

"It's where Layton got his Ph.D.," Jackson said. "He could have gotten me in."

"He still could," Matt said. He glanced at his watch. Office hours were supposed to start soon. "If you don't want to work with me, I understand. Believe me, I do."

But Jackson ran his fingers through his hair, and blew out a long breath as he closed his eyes for a moment. "It's… look, don't worry about it. That's all in the past, right?"

"Right," Matt said.

"And besides, other than claiming we don't get along and going through some kind of mediation to prove it," Jackson went on, "the only other option would be to explain *why* we need to be reassigned and… well that'll probably cost you a job and me an MFA, so… we can just do the term and get it over with."

"You really think it'll be that bad?" Even though Matt certainly deserved Jackson's ire, he was a bit stung by it.

Jackson's face softened a few degrees, though, and he shrugged. "I mean… I suppose we could blow a few minds," he said, offhandedly. "If you can come up with some better material."

"Better material?" Matt balked, and folded his arms over his chest. "Have you read Sybil? It cut deep into the heart of the cancer that was consuming British culture at the peak of the Victorian era. It gave voice to an anguish that had gone ignored since the establishment of the monarchy and nobility."

"It was written before anyone thought to invent an editor," Jackson said plaintively, "like basically everything else that came out of Victorian England."

Matt groaned. "You're still on that kick?"

"Yes," Jackson said. "I'm never going to get off that kick. There were beautifully written books that hit the same notes that people were just too stupid to understand."

“Yes,” Matt said, “because they were poorly educated because the aristocracy wanted to keep the poor under their heels, which is what Sybil is about!”

Jackson only shrugged, and adjusted his shoulder strap. “It’s your class. I’ve read Sybil and I’ll read it again and propose some questions for the quiz and the exam. I have a class to get to.”

Matt bit his lip to keep from saying more as Jackson turned to leave. Better to drop it. They’d do fine, as long as they kept their drama private.

He turned and began collecting his notebooks and papers from the desk.

“Matt,” Jackson said from the doorway. Matt looked up at him. “I guess… it’s good to see you, too. Sort of.” With that, Jackson left.

The door closed with a boom in the empty room, and Matt felt it in his chest.

Chapter 3

Jackson's mind reeled through the rest of the morning, and as it did, his mood grew darker and darker. What made it much, much worse, though, was that the darkness was punctuated by moments of *utterly* ridiculous fantasizing.

The net result was that when he met Trevor for lunch, his friend peered at him suspiciously and asked what was up.

Trevor knew the history. He was one of the only people that did. So Jackson told him.

Trevor stared. "Holy. Shit."

Jackson had expected there to be a bit raunchier humor inbound—it was Trevor's forte—but none came. Instead, Trevor looked merely stricken. "Yes," Jackson agreed.

"So… I mean you have to turn the TA position down then, right?"

"What?" Jackson nearly laughed. "Are you kidding me? I'll have to TA next term if I do that. Instead of graduating and going overseas. No, I can't just drop the class. I need this."

"Well then Matt—sorry, Professor Smith—needs to step down," Trevor said. "He doesn't have to give a reason; he can just get a job somewhere else."

"He almost certainly could," Jackson admitted, "he's brilliant. But people would inevitably ask questions. I'd rather not risk it. Either of us."

"It's unethical, though, isn't it? With your history together?"

Jackson fixed Trevor with a sharp eye. "It's history, for one thing," he said, "but for another, no one knows about it except you. And I expect you to keep your mouth shut."

"It's not like you did anything wrong," Trevor muttered. "He was the adult. He was the one that should have known better. Jesus." He paused. "What was it like, seeing him again?"

"It was…" Jackson searched for the right word. He shrugged. "…complicated? Ambivalent? I mean yes, alright, the way it all went down was painful and… difficult… for both of us, I'm sure."

"But?" Trevor pressed.

Jackson just shrugged again. "I don't know." He did, though. He just felt nervous about saying it out loud. That would make it real, somehow. "Like going back in time for a moment."

"Back to the illegal affair you had with your high school lit teacher," Trevor clarified.

"Yes," Jackson said. "To that. Thank you for reminding me. I'd completely forgotten."

"Don't get pissy with me over your bad decisions," Trevor said.

He poked at his fries, found one he liked, and ate it. “So is he how you remember him?” He asked around the mouthful.

“His hair is longer,” Jackson said. It was all he could really think to say; other than that, Matt pretty much looked the same. What was he now, thirty-two? Thirty-three?

Trevor was on his phone, tapping and peering. “Well, he’s not on Grindr or Scruff or any of the other apps. Maybe he’s got a boyfriend now. Or a husband.”

“Ew,” Jackson said, scrunching his nose. “No offense or anything. But Matt wouldn’t be into that kind of thing.”

“I do take offense,” Trevor said. “What’s wrong with Grindr?”

“I’m not tackling that one.” Jackson took a bite of his sandwich instead.

They’d had that talk before. Trevor more or less lived on his dating apps. They’d met the first year of college, and had a brief encounter that didn’t really go anywhere because Jackson lost his nerve. To his surprise, rather than discarding him, Trevor had insisted they just do something else. They’d gone to see a movie, and then met some of Trevor’s friends, and hung out every week that year. Then, when Trevor’s dorm mate graduated, Jackson moved in. They’d lived together ever since.

In all that time, though, Jackson had never given it up. He’d dated a few guys here and there, but the hard truth was that he was too busy to really cultivate a relationship. In some ways, Trevor was a stand-in for that. All the companionship, none of the complications.

As for Trevor, he couldn’t have asked for a better roommate situation. No one could get so attached that they wanted to move in, because the dorms had strict population limits. Jackson didn’t mind getting out of the place when Trevor hooked up with someone, and for that matter he was perfectly willing to put in his ear buds and listen to music when he had to study and Trevor ‘had an itch’. He had an itch often, and could basically take his pick of the local population of itch-scratchers.

“I’m just saying,” Trevor said, “that if you got fucked more often, then probably you wouldn’t still be hung up on Professor Hottie.”

“I am not hung up on Matt,” Jackson hissed. “And keep your voice down! And also don’t be vulgar.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s a study out there somewhere about how regular sex helps manage stress,” Trevor said.

“Sex with a regular partner,” Jackson corrected. “There is a study. I don’t need de-stressing.”

“Says you,” Trevor muttered.

It was not an argument Jackson wanted to be involved in.

Trevor had a long running interest in Jackson's sex life; mostly because he wanted to be a part of it. Trevor had a Magellan complex as wide as the ocean. If Jackson had ultimately given it up to him, they probably wouldn't have become friends.

"In any case," Jackson said, "be sympathetic. That's what friends are for. I'm venting, not asking for advice. I've made my decision already."

Trevor gave him a deeply patronizing frown, and reached across the table to pat Jackson's hand. "There, there," he said. "I'm sorry you're going through this."

Jackson narrowed his eyes and took his hand away.

"What?" Trevor asked. "Sympathy. You've got it. Just try not to fuck him this time and I'm sure it'll be fine."

"We never fucked," Jackson said.

"At that age, hands and mouth count as fucking."

"I've just been wondering for ages like… what he's been thinking ever since then, you know?" Jackson wondered out loud.

Trevor sighed.

"We kind of ended it on a high note is all," Jackson went on. "Like… one day we were together and happy and the next—poof. It's over."

"Maybe he was thinking he needed another in-house boy to mess around with?" Trevor suggested. "Like, 'whoops, this one graduated, better get another minor'."

"I wasn't a minor," Jackson grumbled.

"Oh, so you took him home to meet your grandma?"

Fair point, but Jackson didn't admit defeat on it. No one would have understood then and no one understood now. Even Trevor. Go figure. "You know," Jackson said, "I would have expected you of all people to understand. I've seen your porn collection."

"That's entirely different," Trevor said. "Fantastical ideation of authoritarian situations involving discipline and loss of control is perfectly normal and is the most common non-vanilla fantasy engaged in by healthy adults." He took a breath. "Acting on it is different."

Jackson laughed. Trevor wasn't what you'd call classically intelligent, but he was getting his masters in psychology. He wouldn't graduate for another two years, and his GPA was barely passable, but when it came to the psychology of porn and sex, his particular interest was piqued enough that he could be convincingly erudite.

"I never said anything about discipline or loss of control," Jackson chuckled. "That one's all you."

"I'll imagine your messed up relationship however I want," Trevor said. "Unless you want to get into more detail on the subject. I'm happy to stand corrected."

"No, thank you," Jackson said.

Trevor grinned. "Bondage and spanking it is, then."

"You're filthy," Jackson told his friend earnestly.

"I'm thinking he used a paddle… or his belt…"

"Oh my god, give it up!" Jackson pleaded.

"No, better yet! A book," Trevor hooted. "Definitely a book."

Jackson threw a fry at the cackling maniac, but kept his mouth shut. No; his relationship with Matt hadn't been anything like that. Aside from the break up part of it, it had been… sweet.

One kiss had turned into two, and that had turned into more. Jackson was on cloud nine. Being in the closet had impacted his prospects of exploration far more than his social anxiety, or his general disdain for, well, almost everyone his age. Now, all the things he'd fantasized about were suddenly coming into sharp focus. Being with Matt was like being at an all you can eat buffet.

When they had the chance to sneak away, at least, which was rare. They had to be careful about it. They barely looked at one another in class. Jackson liked it that way. He had a secret, one that no one would have guessed. In public, they were only as social as any other teacher and student. The tension between them was only for them. No one else could feel it.

Everything became an innuendo because of it. The way Matt read a passage from a semi-racy bit of trashy Victorian-era romance. Jackson had read the Bronte sisters' work before, out of curiosity, and hadn't liked it. But when Matt read an excerpt from Villette, though, it felt different—like he was reading it to Jackson alone.

Matt's eyes lingered on Jackson once in a while, though, and Jackson would stroke his pencil suggestively but with a distant, unconcerned look on his face. He imagined Matt behind his desk, struggling with an erection that he had to will down before he could stand up again and speak in front of the class.

When they did have their moments, they were fierce and fiery. They hadn't been at first. They'd been tentative and anxious early on. A week ago. It hadn't lasted long. Matt had driven Jackson home in his truck —the long way—after Jackson had walked a mile from school down Baker. Matt had picked him up and they had driven in frozen, terrified silence for half a mile before Jackson reached for Matt's pants, intent on sucking him off while they drove.

"What are you doing?" Matt had asked.

"Having fun," Jackson said, his voice shaking a little.

"We should wait."

Jackson ignored him. He liked that Matt seemed to freeze whenever he made a move—it made him feel powerful. He knew the effect he had on

the older man and he loved it. It gave him confidence.

"Jackson, please, I'm driving," Matt complained, half-heartedly.

But Matt's zipper and button came undone under Jackson's deft, slender fingers. He slipped his hand under the khakis and over the straining bulge of Matt's cock where it was already trying to argue in Jackson's favor. "Just keep your eyes on the road, then," Jackson said, smiling as he leaned over in the cab of the truck. "And take Miller," he added, breathing against Matt's underwear, "it'll take longer."

"Jackson," Matt breathed as his cock sprang free and knocked against Jackson's lips, "you shouldn't. Please—oh… god…"

That was when Jackson learned that when they were alone, he was the one that was really in charge.

Chapter 4

It wasn't as difficult as Matt had first imagined it would be. Jackson softened within a few days, and they found a balance. There was no doubt that Jackson was an asset—he came prepared to every lecture and discussion with extra notes and questions to pose. In some ways, Matt actually thought he had the makings of a better teacher.

And he found that he didn't mind assigning some of the credit for that development to himself. There were shadows of his own teaching style in there. It wasn't enough to ask what the book was about—that was kids' stuff, and Jackson had never cared for that question. Instead, he posed questions that Matt would have thought of—what did the book mean for the times? Who was the audience? What was the underlying commentary? How did it change the society that it impacted? If it didn't, why?

Literature to Matt and Jackson both was like having a puzzle piece without the benefit of the whole picture. They weren't just books. They were golems; crafted from a specific kind of clay in a specific climate, in reaction to specific events. They had a purpose, and a living presence in the communities that gave rise to them.

After two weeks, the first papers were due. It was a testament to the quality of the student body at Rose State that they were extensive. The only guidelines given had been a minimum word count, a format, and a loose starting thesis—an open invitation to impress the instructor. The students had apparently accepted.

Some of the papers were twenty pages long, with three page bibliographies. It was a pleasant change from grading high school papers. It was also daunting. These needed to be graded over the weekend. Matt supposed he hadn't had plans anyway. He would have had to cancel them.

After the papers were turned in and the class had vacated the room, spent and ready for the weekend, Jackson wandered over from his desk and ruffled the edges of the stack of white printer paper. It had to be at least eight inches thick. "Good thing you got a TA for this class," he muttered. "Lucky me. Maybe you should make less of an impression on your students in the future."

"I can get these," Matt said.

Jackson sighed, and took half the stack anyway. "Firstly: no, you can't. Second: it's my job, and I have to do it. I'm not TAing for you for my health or to put some empty credential on my interview for Oxford. I'm doing it because I want the work."

Matt laughed softly. Jackson never had been one to take the easy road. "Of course you are. I'm sorry, I just… figured the less you had to do with me the better."

"Why would you think that?"

It felt like a trick question, so Matt was careful in his answer. "Because I've made a lot of assumptions about how you might feel about working with me." Honesty and logic were what appealed to Jackson. It was best to stick with them.

"I'm not that opposed to it. Not at the expense of grading papers late," Jackson said. "Trust me, the students here hate that and they'll complain. This place is not short on privilege or entitlement, and some of your students have parents with pull. We can get these done over the weekend if we split them up."

"I should at least review your grades before they go out," Matt said.

Jackson's eyebrow crept up. "Of course, Professor."

"I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant, Matt," Jackson said gently. He frowned at the stack of papers in his arm. "So… what do you think? Should I take these home with me or do you think we can be adults and grade them together?"

Matt rubbed the back of his neck before he could stop himself. It was a dead giveaway, and he saw Jackson's eyes track it.

"For god's sake, Matt," Jackson sighed. "I'm grown up, okay?"

"No," Matt said, "I… of course you are. I know that. Sorry. We can use my office. Meet me after classes?"

"Good choice," Jackson mused. "You've probably got quarters on campus, as an interim professor, but meeting there would be inappropriate."

"Yes, Jackson," Matt said, "it *would* be inappropriate. I'll see you tonight."

Jackson kept his stack of papers, and slipped them into his messenger bag. "I'll see you then. Professor."

Matt shook his head slowly and packed his bag. Like it or not, there was hardly ever any point arguing with Jackson over anything. When he couldn't win with words, he'd win however else he could.

Matt struggled to focus, his knuckles white on the wheel. His will had eroded instantly the moment Jackson's warm, slick, electric mouth engulfed him. It wasn't expert, or even adept; but there was something about it all the same that had him close to coming in minutes.

"Jackson," he breathed, mouth dry and voice hoarse, "you have to stop. Please, baby, I'm about to come."

Jackson let off of him for just a moment. "That's the point. You can pull over, you know."

If he did, there was no telling how far it would go. Guilt was already squeezing his chest. This was wrong. Jackson was a student, and

what Matt was currently letting the boy do to his cock, no matter how good it felt, was the sort of thing that ruined careers and lives for both parties.

So why couldn't he just stop it from happening?

Jackson began to moan a little, whimpering as he felt Matt's cock swell. The sound pushed him over the edge. "Don't swallow," was all Matt could think to say, suddenly panicked. As if that was, somehow, the line not to cross.

But Jackson only chuckled a little bit around the mouthful of hard flesh, and then gave Matt a few slow, tight tugs.

All the breath left Matt's chest in a strained growl, and his foot mashed the gas as Jackson swallowed the gush of orgasm that came so hard that Matt's balls ached with it. It seemed endless, and Jackson mewled in his lap as he took it all with a reckless joy and mischievous excitement that made it that much hotter.

As Matt recovered, Jackson nursed his cock, causing involuntary twitches that quickly began to make it difficult to drive, or breathe. "Okay," he said, "you're done. Come on. Jackson, seriously… fuck… leave it, baby."

Jackson did, and he wiped his mouth on his sleeve when he sat up. He was grinning smugly. "That's twice."

"What?" Matt was still a little daze, but he was certain he'd only come once.

"You called me baby," Jackson said. "Twice." He held up two fingers for emphasis.

"Well I couldn't think straight," Matt grumbled. "Not with what you were doing to me."

"Was it good, then?"

Matt glanced at the boy, prepared to tell him the smug thing wasn't cute—even though it was—but saw instead that Jackson seemed earnest about it. That was when Matt realized exactly what he'd done wrong. Yes, there was the legal side of it. That was wrong from a certain point of view.

But in Jackson's eyes now he saw the vulnerability of a young man who hadn't yet grown an ounce of armor. A wiser man would have ended it there and explained why. He'd have done the right thing. Well, a wiser man wouldn't have let it start.

All that Matt could think, though, was that he couldn't bear to be the one that made this kid grow that armor.

"Yeah, baby," he said, his heart aching as he pulled Jackson close to him with one arm. "It was perfect."

Matt pored over the papers that evening. It was almost nine now, and he felt like a stranger in Tim's office. None of the ancient books on the shelves or the fascinating artifacts of bronze and copper that set off the chocolate walls were his. He was a visitor.

Somehow, that made it feel almost illicit to be meeting Jackson here. Even if there was nothing going on between them, it was as though just the presence of their history here was breaking some rule. For all he knew, it actually was. A college as old as Rose State had undoubtedly had cause to write statutes regarding things like previous relationships between faculty and students.

It shouldn't have bothered him. It was done and over with and Jackson seemed to have made peace with it, even if it had taken a tense reunion for him to do so. Or, maybe he'd just been giving Matt a hard time in the first place. Was this strangeness between them all in his head? It would be ironic, he thought, for him to have worried all this time about how he'd possibly screwed Jackson up, when it was actually him that had been damaged by the whole thing.

Jackson had probably had plenty of partners and boyfriends between now and then. A boy that gorgeous? It was a no brainer.

Matt hadn't, though. After Jackson, he'd been broken for a long time, and when he finally healed he just couldn't bring himself to be all that interested in anyone else. He'd thought he was at peace with that, with waiting for the right moment, the right man. Now, he wasn't so sure.

Jackson didn't knock when he came in, and he didn't come empty handed.

"What's that?" Matt asked, even though he already knew. It was a red flag is what it was.

Jackson held up a bottle of wine. "Trust me," he said. "Grading papers is a lot easier with a glass of wine. Or two." He sauntered to the desk and set the bottle down. Then he pointed to a hutch. "Layton is a brandy lover, but tumblers will work just fine for getting it in us."

"I don't think we should be drinking," Matt said. He'd intended to say it with some degree of resoluteness.

"Jesus Christ," Jackson groaned. "Don't tell me I'm the one peer pressuring you. God, that's sad. Look, have you read some of these papers?"

Admittedly, Matt had been skimming. "I just started," Matt lied. "What does that have to do with it?"

Jackson walked around the desk and slid open one of the rolling doors of the oak hutch near the window. He pulled out two of Tim Layton's tumblers and brought them back to the desk. "All due respect to my peers," he said as though he didn't consider them his peers at all, "but some of these papers are *painful*." He poured two glasses, and slid Matt one of them.

"Don't be too critical," Matt warned him as he took the glass. "It's a literature class, not a writing class. I'm looking for understanding, not necessarily style."

"Well that's good," Jackson said, "because there is zero style to be found."

Matt had to agree. They got through about five papers each before he had to request another glass of wine. Jackson was smug when he poured it.

"Told you," he said.

"Don't be smug," Matt said. "It's not cute."

"That's a lie," Jackson said, pouring himself a second glass as well. "I happen to know for a fact you think smug is cute."

Any response felt dangerous, so Matt didn't offer one. Instead he sipped his glass, and set the paper he'd just graded aside.

Jackson was watching him with a look on his face that Matt had a hard time reading. "What?" he asked.

There was a pause. Jackson set his glass down. "Just… I haven't really asked how you've been. Since…"

"I guess I didn't ask you either," Matt said.

Lips pursed, Jackson looked up, maybe to keep from looking at Matt when he spoke. "I always sort of imagined that I'd hear from you," he said. "Not to get back together. Just to check up on me or something? I don't know why."

"I should have," Matt said. "I wanted to. I thought it would be a bad idea. Or that you'd be angry. Which, you had a right to be."

"I was." Jackson picked his glass back up and drank half of it in a go. After, he rested it on his knee and watched it. His eyes flickered up to Matt's just once. "I think I got over it. Mostly. What about you? How have you been these six years?"

"I thought I'd been okay," Matt said.

Jackson looked at him now, eyebrows knit. "What's that mean?"

It was best to say all this now, Matt supposed. Get it out in the open. Now that they had some real privacy together. Old habits died hard. Or not at all, maybe. "I… should never have done what I did," he said.

Jackson snorted at that. "Oh. Okay. Well it was all your fault, so…"

"Don't be like that," Matt sighed. "Look I mean that I was the adult. I should have… taken control of the situation. Been the older, wiser one."

"I seem to recall you did take control once or twice," Jackson said. There was a hint of that old smile at the corner of his lips.

"You know what I mean," Matt chided him. "You weren't ready for what we had. Neither was I, for the record. I was still reeling from Robert and I took advantage of the fact that you were so…"

"Hungry?" Jackson supplied.

“Eager,” Matt said. “Both. It was an ego thing. And I felt awful about it for years. You know before this I hadn’t taught for two years? I finished out my contract with Carlton and didn’t sign the renewal. I was so worried that I would meet some other kid—maybe a minor this time—and fuck things up again.”

“Were you just into me because I was a student?” Jackson asked. He sipped his wine again. “Just because of the danger in it?”

“What?” Matt shook his head quickly. “No, Jackson… of course not. You know why I fell—shit—you know why I was attracted to you.”

He hadn’t corrected himself quickly enough. Probably the wine buzz had tripped him up. Damn it. Jackson looked like he’d been punched.

“There was no excuse,” Matt hurried on to say before the floodgates opened. “For the relationship, or for how it ended. I thought the best thing I could do was cut you loose, let you find your own way. I’d already done enough damage and I was terrified of doing more, Jackson.”

“Well.” Jackson said. He looked at his glass expectantly but it was empty. So was the bottle. “It’s pretty late.”

“It is,” Matt agreed. “We can pick this up tomorrow. The grading, I mean.”

“Sure.” Jackson nodded his head slowly. “I just have the one class tomorrow. Off at noon. Then Sunday, of course. We should be able to get it all done. The papers, I mean.”

“I know,” Matt said.

After a moment, Jackson set the glass down on the desk, and gathered his set of papers. He passed Matt the ones he’d graded and put the others back in his bag. “Just… can I ask you one thing?”

Matt braced himself. “Yes. Anything.”

“Did you miss me? For a little while, even?”

If Matt had said no, he would have been a liar… but maybe it would have been better. This was a scab for them both. Picking at it would only make it worse. But for a moment he saw something in Jackson’s face, that same old vulnerability. Was it possible he hadn’t grown any armor in all this time?

A familiar heartache stilled the lie in his throat. When he spoke, it was barely more than a whisper. “Yeah, Jackson. Of course I did.”

Chapter 5

Trevor was still up when Jackson got home. It was only midnight, so it wasn't that surprising. Trevor's reaction when Jackson came in was, though.

"What kept you out so late?" he asked.

Given that the two of them generally maintained a don't-ask-don't-tell policy regarding when Trevor got home, which was any given hour of any given day or night depending on how fun the most recent hook-up was, Jackson took issue with the question.

"Why do you care?" he asked. "I wasn't doing anything you haven't done. Actually… yes, I was."

"Jesus, Jackson," Trevor said, "you weren't fucking Professor Smith—"

"What? Trevor, no. I was grading papers. Asshole."

While not quite mollified, Trevor did relent a little bit. "Just grading papers?"

Jackson sat down his messenger bag and took a calming breath. If he'd had no inclination at all to make a move on Matt, probably he wouldn't be so sensitive about it. The truth was, however, that he *had* been so inclined. He just hadn't, which was a score for self-control.

"Just grading papers," Jackson confirmed for his nosy friend. "What exactly do you think a TA does?"

"Depends on the TA," Trevor muttered.

"What did you do tonight?" Jackson asked, changing the subject as he kicked off his shoes and made his way to the couch.

"Hung out," Trevor said. "Finished a paper for Gordon. Still have to proof it but I'm out of fucks to give tonight, so…"

"No upcoming prospects?" Jackson teased. He nudged Trevor with his foot.

Trevor's hand dropped as though he might push the foot away. Instead, he grabbed it and pulled it into his lap. Before Jackson could protest, Trevor's thumbs enacted some kind of biological miracle over the sore muscles there.

Jackson managed to tug his foot back once before he lost the will to fight it. "I had no idea how sore my feet were," he murmured. "Fuck, that feels good. What's up with you?"

"Nothing," Trevor said. "Just figured you could use a little relaxing. And, you know, since you're celibate…"

"Don't ruin it, jerk." Jackson kicked his friend playfully with the other foot. Then the two of them went quiet as Trevor massaged.

In the silence, Jackson's conscience nagged him. This was flirting. He knew that; he wasn't stupid or blind. It wasn't fair to

Trevor to let it go on. But Trevor sometimes seemed to need it. Like it was the only basis of a relationship he really understood. Or, just as likely, he actually did hope that if he flirted often enough, hard enough, Jackson would cave.

But what then? Then they'd probably have sex constantly, date for a few months at the most, before Trevor was back on Grindr looking for the next one. He'd done it before to other people. Jackson had watched it happened, aloof, suspending judgment on his friend because it was his life to live and not Jackson's place to tell him it was a shitty way to treat people.

Maybe they did the same thing though. And there was a part—a tiny, distant, non-verbal part—of Jackson's mind that suggested irrationally that it might be different with him. That Trevor had somehow waited long enough, and that when he finally got what he wanted he'd hold onto it.

Jackson gently pulled his foot away from Trevor's hands. "Thanks," he said.

Trevor reached for the other, but Jackson swung his feet off the couch. "I've been up since six," he said. "I gotta get some sleep while I can. I plan on sleeping in tomorrow. Until like… maybe seven. Seven fifteen."

"It's a slippery slope," Trevor said. He reached for his phone. "If anyone bites, I'll keep it quiet."

Jackson bit his lip, and stood. Right. If it wasn't Jackson, it would just be someone else. That was the whole problem. "Good night," he said, and rubbed Trevor's head as he passed by to his room, ruffling his hair. "Good luck."

The thing about Matt, Jackson reflected when he'd shed his clothes and crawled into bed, was that Matt had made it seem like Jackson was the only man in the world that mattered. What was wrong with wanting to feel like that? Now if Grindr had existed then, maybe it would have been a different story. Or if they hadn't been in rural Texas.

Jackson sighed, and rubbed his face. Texas. Shit. He hadn't called Gran in almost a month. He reached for his phone, remembered the time, and set himself a reminder instead. She'd be up early. Hell, she'd be up by about four. He wasn't going to call her that early… eight would be fine. He could call her before he started on his Composition 303 paper. Which… was due on Monday. Fuck.

Well, it was going to be a busy weekend.

Jackson bent over the engine to his car and stared at the inscrutable puzzle that was the strange artifact that made the car go. The staring didn't fix it, and he didn't try anything else because he couldn't

think of anything else to try. He assumed that it was a delicate enough machine that randomly pulling and shaking the wires and tubes around it would not only not *fix it, but might actually make it worse.*

Granted, it didn't get much worse than dead.

It was ninety-seven degrees outside, and the sky was clear and blue. It was down from a high of a hundred and two. The sun was still high enough to keep it hot and dry for the two hour walk home if he attempted it.

He cursed the inventor of the automobile for not planning thoroughly enough, and slammed the hood of the car closed. He could have Wendel, the farm's foreman, bring him to school tomorrow probably, and he could tow the car home to fix it.

"Problems?"

Jackson looked over his shoulder. Mr. Smith had pulled up in his white truck, and was frowning at Jackson, the sun in his eyes. "Yeah," Jackson said. "My grandmother's car. It's just old. It dies from time to time."

"Is someone coming to pick you up?" Mr. Smith asked.

Jackson shook his head. "I haven't called anyone and… it's not that far to walk."

"It's too hot out for that," Mr. Smith said. "Hop in, I'll take you home."

"It's probably not on your way." Get into close quarters with his current crush? No, thank you. Probably Jackson would piss himself or something. Or he'd stare, and Mr. Smith would get the wrong idea—or, well, the right idea, he supposed—and then freak out and…

"Doesn't matter," Mr. Smith said. "You can't walk in this heat. Come on."

Jackson wanted to say that he would do fine on his own and had made the walk many times, thank you, but… a ten-minute ride in a truck did beat a two hour walk on hot asphalt. He grabbed his book bag from the back seat, and then got into the passenger side. "Thanks," he mumbled. He brushed his hair out of his eyes and behind his ear. "Take a left at the road, and then right on Baker."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n," Mr. Smith said. He was a dork like that. It's part of what Jackson liked so much about him.

The silence that Jackson carefully cultivated next was broken quickly when Mr. Smith, like any good teacher, began asking questions.

"We're headed toward farm country, right?"

"Yep," Jackson said.

"Does your family farm?"

"My grandmother, yeah."

Jackson was familiar with the moment of trepidation before someone asked whether his parents were in the picture. He felt it now.

But the question didn't come. "That explains it then," Mr. Smith said.

Jackson glanced at him, quizzical. "Explains what?"

"The callouses on your hands," Mr. Smith said. "I noticed them the other day, but you don't seem—no offense—like the sports type. I'd wondered. You work on the farm?"

"Yeah," Jackson told him, self-consciously tucking his hands under his thighs. "We do corn, eggs, okra, strawberries, pheasants. Trying to get into beans because strawberry season is different now, what with climate change and all."

"Quite a spread," Mr. Smith said. "Are you thinking of going into agriculture?"

Jackson laughed a little, and shook his head. "Uh, no. Not if I can help it."

"What, then?"

It was a question he was so rarely asked that Jackson could only shrug. "I haven't… thought about it much."

"Really?" Mr. Smith looked genuinely shocked. "Senior year, man. Halfway done. You've applied to colleges at least, right?"

"Not really." Now that someone was asking, Jackson decided he didn't particularly care for it.

"Why on Earth not, Jackson?" Mr. Smith asked. "Don't get me wrong, here—there are a lot of smart, talented kids in this school. But Jackson… you can't not go to college."

"Lots of people don't go to college, Mr. Smith," Jackson said. "A lot of them do just fine."

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

It was a funny question, Jackson reflected. It wasn't really meant to be permission. It was just a different way of asking 'why' regardless of whether the recipient 'minded' or not. He didn't mind saying, it was just that he didn't have a good reason. Not one that Mr. Smith or anyone else would understand. "I just don't feel like I really can," he said.

"You will absolutely make it into whatever college you apply to," Mr. Smith said. "Believe me."

Jackson shook his head. "No, I know that, just… I'd have to be away from home for like six or seven years, right? More, maybe. That's a long time, and Gran would have to replace me. Farm hands are expensive." He shrugged. "They are if you insist on paying them a living wage, at least." Jackson's Gran worked about as openly with migrant laborers as anyone else did, but she paid them well for the work instead of cheating them like many of the other farmers.

Mr. Smith pulled the truck over. For some reason, this panicked Jackson, and he wondered if he was about to be booted.

But his teacher just turned to him, a serious, concerned look on his

face. “Let me get this straight. You’re going to waste this amazing gift you have, this incredible mind, because you don’t want your grandmother’s farm to fail? If you’re not there to maintain it, it’ll go under?”

If there was one thing Jackson hated it was losing an argument, so he carefully considered his answer. “It… wouldn’t fail, no. But she needs me there.”

“She’s told you she wants you to stay, instead of fulfilling your potential?” Mr. Smith asked, dramatic bewilderment on his face.

Jackson sighed. “No, of course not, just… she’s old, and who knows how long she has, you know? She’s taken care of me. I don’t want to just turn my back on her. It would be wrong. I have a debt.”

Mr. Smith’s face pinched with pain, and he turned away from Jackson and started the truck again. “At some point,” he said softly, “you’ll need to start thinking about what you *want. Living your own life isn’t selfish, Jackson. Following your passion and taking risks is what fulfills your parents’ dreams for you. Your grandmother would probably agree.”*

“Yeah, well,” Jackson said, “she probably wouldn’t if she knew what kind of life I wanted to live.”

“What’s that,” Mr. Smith chuckled. “Thinking of getting into drugs? Illegal weapons? Pimping?”

“She doesn’t know I’m gay,” Jackson blurted out. “If she did, she might have opinions about it.”

The truck sat idle for a long time.

“I can walk the rest of the way,” Jackson muttered.

“No, no,” Mr. Smith said quickly. “No… sorry, I was just weighing my words. They’re important. Or at least, they’re important when you don’t get to hear them. I should know.”

Jackson waited. His stomach was unsteady. He’d never told anyone before. Was Mr. Smith about to give him a bible speech? If so, he’d just bolt.

“I lost my mother a few years ago,” Mr. Smith said after some time. “She… never knew I was gay. I never really came out. I had a partner at the time, a guy named Robert. He never got to meet her. Later, when I did come out to my father, he said that he wished I’d had the courage to tell my mother because she died not knowing who I was. And she would have embraced me for being my real self with her.”

“What if she hadn’t?” Jackson asked, stunned at the admission—it felt like the sort of thing he shouldn’t know about his teacher, somehow—but sympathetic all the same. “What if your dad had been wrong?”

“You can’t hang your life on what ifs,” Mr. Smith said. “If you do, it’ll never go anywhere.”

Probably, he would have said it differently if he knew what Jackson thought in that moment.

Chapter 6

"So, how's the college professor life treating you?" Tessa Lawrence was one of the first colleagues from Carlton High to become a good friend. She'd driven up from Carlton to visit over the weekend, and now sat across from Matt in a booth at Willy's Grill just outside campus. She was a history teacher and somehow looked exactly the way a history teacher should look: wide rimmed glasses, a conservative bob haircut, hair a plain but shiny brown. She had the kind of narrow-faced, mousy look that seemed perfectly suited to being buried in a history book.

Matt's head bobbed a few times as he tried to come up with a proper judgment of the experience. "It's… interesting," he said. "A different kind of challenge than high school. The students talk a lot more, for one thing. It's not like pulling teeth. That part I love. Grading papers on the other hand…"

"The quality at least has to be better, right? You're teaching a 200 class?"

"205," Matt said. "But you might be surprised. Luckily, I have a TA to help me with that. Also another huge difference. I can't believe there isn't a teacher's assistant program for high school. It would change your life, Tess."

"I remember being TA when I did my Master's," she said. "I hope you're at least not a monster about it."

"I hope not," Matt said. "Actually, we have a rapport already—it's Jackson Greene. You remember him? He was a senior when I started."

"Jackson Greene." Tessa said Jackson's name with a hint of mild surprise. Then she busied herself with her coffee.

"Yes," Matt said. Tessa raised an eyebrow and shrugged one shoulder. "What?"

"Well… you didn't hear this from me, okay? But, there were… rumors about you two." She winced when Matt's jaw dropped open and the color drained from his face. It wasn't possible she knew exactly why, at least. She filled in the gaps on her own. "I know, I know. I shut them down whenever I heard them. It was just ugly office chatter, that's all. Still, you know, it's probably a good idea to keep him at arm's length now that he's all grown up. Word travels."

"I… who thought…?"

Tessa waved the question away. "It's not important. Really. I'm just giving you a heads up, that's all. I'd hate for history to repeat. You have to admit, you did spend an awful lot of time with him."

"He needed attention," Matt said, trying to keep the heat from his voice. Getting defensive would only make his own paranoia worse.

“He was a gifted young man—he still is, you know—and you know what? It paid off. He’s about to finish his master’s degree a year early and he’s looking at going to Oxford for his Ph.D. He’s smarter than just about anyone else I know, including me. So. I’m glad that I did spend time with him. He needed it.”

Tessa’s eyes had grown just a little wide, and she leaned back a bit in the booth. “I’m not suggesting anything untoward happened, Matt. I get it. I had a couple of student crushes as well.”

“Seriously?” He didn’t have any right to question it, not after what he’d engaged in with Jackson, but for Tessa to admit it so openly seemed… wrong.

She corrected his definition quickly. “Not like that,” she said. “A student crush is like, when you see that one student that reminds you of yourself or something and you go on a crusade to make sure they’re successful. We really should do it with every student, but… once in a while you just find a special one and you don’t want him or her to get lost in the crowd.”

“Oh,” Matt breathed, and then chuckled. “Jesus, I thought you meant… you know, something else.”

“Oh, there are some hot seniors, don’t get me wrong,” Tess laughed. “It’s like masturbation. Everyone does it, no one talks about it.”

Everyone does it. Right.

Matt rolled his eyes, and tried to calm his moment of panic. It faded easily enough as he and Tess traded war stories from the classroom. Eventually, though, they were out of food, the bill had been paid, and there was a danger of camping at the table they were at.

“I should get going anyway,” Tess said when Matt suggested they free up this poor college kid’s only means of earning beer money. “I’d love to see you more often, but this particular time I’m headed a little further north to visit my sister. She’s having a baby.”

“Another one?”

Tess sighed, and nodded. “Someone said the ‘p’ word in her general vicinity and poof! Pregnant again. How she is so fertile, I have no idea. I’m just glad I didn’t get her uterus.”

“It’s never too late for a happy accident,” Matt said as Tess hugged him.

She pushed him away and pointed a finger. “Shut your wicked mouth, Matthew Smith. Don’t lay that curse on me.”

They laughed together as they left Willy’s. It had been too short a visit, although there were still papers to grade and he did need to get back to them.

Tessa pursed her lips a moment and looked up at Matt once

they were outside, concerned. “Not to beat a dead horse, but… just be careful around Jackson Greene. Okay?”

“I have nothing to be careful about,” Matt said. “Really. I don’t know where those rumors came from.”

She lit a cigarette, puffed it, and then considered the burning ember at the tip. “There was… one thing.”

Shit.

“Okay,” Matt said with forced casualness. “What was that?”

Another puff. She looked uncomfortable, her eyes tracking clouds and trees and whatever else was local and not Matt’s face. “It’s silly, I know. After graduation… someone said they saw you and Jackson talking and that he sort of stormed off.”

“That,” Matt said. He breathed a false sigh of relief. Someone had seen the breakup. “Jesus… no, Jackson was angry with me because I told him if he didn’t go to college he’d be wasting his life and he took exception to it. He doesn’t like being told what to do. I guess he got over it, though.”

“Of course I figured it was something like that,” Tess said. She hugged him again with one arm, and then gave him a peck on the cheek. “Just wanted you to know the whole story, that’s all. You have to admit, the way you two used to talk it was a little like, in another life, you’d have been made for one another.”

Right. In another life.

They said their goodbyes, and Matt tried not to dwell on that as he headed back to campus to meet Jackson for another round of grading and frustration.

This time, the talk stayed far, far away from anything regarding their old life and all the sins that were buried there. Jackson did still bring a bottle of wine, though, and this time he brought wine glasses, too.

“It just doesn’t seem right to drink wine from a tumbler,” he explained as he poured them both a glass of *marechal foch*. He swirled his own, and raised it. “Cheers.”

“*Santé*,” Matt said.

Jackson rolled his eyes, but smiled. “Show off.”

And they got to work.

Conversation was kept firmly directed at the papers, points of grading contention, and short arguments about whether a particular paper really hit the mark or not—some of it was, Jackson contended, more theory than actual history, while Matt preferred to grade by creativity and the willingness to make conjectures—and after four hours of that the bottle was empty, the papers were graded, and the two of them lounged in the office finishing their final glasses of wine.

"I saw Tessa today," Matt said. "Ms. Lawrence."

"Really?" Jackson smiled. "I loved her. How's she doing?"

"Well, it seems like." Matt swirled the last swallow of wine in his glass and then finished it off. "She… said there were some rumors about us."

"Ah," Jackson said. "Can you really call it a rumor if it's true?"

"I suppose that's debatable," Matt conceded. "But no one ever knew for sure or… brought charges or anything."

"Mischief managed," Jackson said, and raised his glass for a final toast before he finished it off.

"I haven't asked," Matt said, "but are you seeing anyone?"

"You haven't asked," Jackson agreed. "So why are you asking now?"

"Because I've had a few glasses," Matt said, "and can no longer help myself. I'm curious. As a friend and mentor."

"I didn't imagine it was anything else, Matt." Jackson set his glass down, and shifted in his chair. "There's a guy. But… we're not seeing one another. I don't think I really want to; he's sort of a man whore? But we're good friends. Have been for a long time."

Man whore sounded a bit harsh. Matt tried to discern whether this was some subtle barb at their own history.

"I know that he's interested," Jackson went on, "and I almost want to give it a try but… there's history and… I don't want it to get messy, you know?"

"Yeah," Matt said, "I do know how that is. This… guy, is he, you know…"

They watched one another.

Jackson raised an eyebrow slowly and then smiled. "It's not you, Matt."

Matt flushed. "No, of course not—"

"You totally thought I was talking about you," Jackson said, eyes sparkling with humor. "Really, Matt? After everything? You think I'd want to do all that again? The hiding and sneaking and breaking up?"

He was caught. So he copped. "You said history, and it might get messy, and that you'd been good friends for a long time." He shrugged. "Come to think of it, I guess the good friends part doesn't really fit."

Jackson sighed, and leaned forward in his chair to rest his elbows on the desk. "We're friends, Matt. And why would I think you're a man whore? I don't know what you've been up to."

"Not enough to qualify," Matt said. He waved the whole situation away. "I was just projecting or something. It's fine. Go on. So, there's a guy—maybe."

"My roommate, Trevor," Jackson said, emphasizing Trevor's name for clarity, maybe. "He's sweet. Not real smart. Well, smart in his field, I guess. He's a psych major. Kind of a jock. I like him, and all, just…"

"What?"

"I kind of feel like it's not really me he wants," Jackson said. There was a note of disappointment in his voice, like maybe he wanted Trevor to want him. "Like I'm just a place holder for anyone else with him. I could almost see it happening. Well… almost, I guess, but there's just... I just sort of miss feeling like I'm the one person someone wants. Which is silly, and a little selfish, I realize."

"It's not selfish at all," Matt said softly. "I'm sorry you haven't felt like that yet."

"I have," Jackson said. "That's the problem."

"Well, what happened with that person?"

Jackson was quiet a moment, and then straightened from the desk. He ran his fingers through his hair. "It didn't work out. I should… go. I have work to do for my own classes."

"Of course." Matt stood, and rounded the table. There was a moment, a complex series of jerky movement on both their parts that ended, ultimately, with a handshake and some nervous chuckling.

When it was over, Jackson gathered his things and then stood awkwardly for a heartbeat, expectantly, maybe, before he finally waved, and left. "I'll see you Monday, Professor," he said as he left.

Matt flopped into Tim's soft office chair and tilted it back until he could put his feet up on the desk. Just then, Jackson had wanted Matt to kiss him. It had been like a neon sign flashing over his head. Like gravity, tugging them into orbit around one another.

He should have known. *He'd* been the last one to make Jackson feel that way, like he was the only person Matt wanted. He knew now, because that had been how he felt.

It was still how he felt. And it was quickly beginning to feel like torture, too.

Chapter 7

Jackson collapsed onto his bed, thankful for the sounds of Trevor's exploits that floated between their rooms through the shared bathroom that separated them. From the sound of it, he was giving it to someone hard and deep.

Whoever the lucky bottom was, he was loud but not unpleasantly so; so there was that. More importantly, he was keeping Trevor occupied so that Jackson was able to take that particular complication off his plate for the evening.

He let his mind wander and melt, and when it did the image of Matt's dark eyes hung before him, over the lips that he hadn't kissed in six years but which he could still remember, down to painfully minute details, exactly how they felt. Not just on his lips, but on his ear, his neck, his chest. Everywhere. Sex with Matt back then had been a roller coaster toward epic orgasms that left him feeling full and sated instead of empty and tired.

He ran his hand over his stomach, and found the button of his pants. He ought to relieve himself now, get this out of the way, so that he could focus on finishing his paper.

Just as his fingers began to wrap around his shaft, however, Jackson's phone rang. For half a second, he hoped it was Matt, telling him to come back over. It didn't matter what the reason was. If Jackson got him alone again…

But it wasn't Matt. It was Gran. Jackson felt almost guilty for touching himself; it was like being walked in on, except not quite as humiliating.

He answered, and braced himself for the gentle but pointed ire of the woman who raised him and now heard from him maybe once a month—if he put it on a calendar somewhere.

"Hey, Gran," he said.

"Oh, Jackson!" Gran's voice was thinner than last time. "I didn't expect you to answer, I figured you were in class or busy with work."

"I'm on a break," Jackson told her. "I was just about to call you, actually. I was thinking about you last night."

"That's sweet, honey," Gran said. "How is school going?"

"Great right now. I'm assisting in the British Lit class this term."

"How wonderful. Any… young men in your life?"

Jackson smiled. It took an effort for his Gran to take an interest. If not for Matt, he probably would never have come out to her. She didn't understand, but she always made sure to be supportive, at least.

"Not right now," he said. "I'm too busy for all that anyway, Gran."

"Well you just be sure to take time for yourself, too," she said. "You know your grandfather and I spent a lot of time apart when he was in the military. We were both very busy. I wish we hadn't been."

"I know, Gran." Jackson's grandfather had died when he was small, not long after he'd gone to live with them. She'd never even entertained the idea of seeing anyone else. Grampa had been the one man for her.

"Well, listen, sweetie," Gran said. "I wanted to check up on you. And… well I wanted to tell you something. I don't want you to worry about me, but I didn't want to keep anything from you, either."

"Gran? What is it?" Jackson sat up straighter, frowning.

"Oh, Doctor Martin wants me to go in for surgery," she said. "It's nothing major. They do it all the time, and you know they're very precise these days."

"Surgery?" Jackson shook his head, and stood to pace the room. "Wait, why?"

"Oh, dear… I had a bit of an episode, a few weeks ago," Gran said, sounding guilty for having just mentioned it. "It wasn't a big deal. They gave me some medication and I've been fine. My heart is just wearing out, but after the surgery I'll be right as rain."

"When you say episode, Gran… did you have heart attack?"

"They have some fancy name for what happened," she said. "But, in essence… I suppose I did, yes."

Jackson reeled. He should have gone home for the summer like he'd originally intended. He should have been there to help with the farm. She was working too hard, that's what had caused this, and she shouldn't have had to. If Jackson had gone back down there instead of taking summer classes he could have helped with the harvest and—

"Now, I can practically hear you taking this on yourself," Gran said sternly. "You just stop that this instant."

"I should have come down to help, Gran," Jackson said. "I'm sorry, I—"

"None of that," Gran said. "Now you listen to me. Sweetie, I'm just old. That's all there is to it. I'm old, and tired, and these old bones are going to give out at one point or another."

"Don't say that, Gran," Jackson sighed. "You're not that old."

Gran laughed. "I'm certainly too old to need flattery. Eighty-four is old, Jackson. Older than most people get to be. I'm not telling you all this to scare you—I wouldn't have told you at all except… well, I don't want it to sneak up on you."

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say," Jackson admitted. "I don't…" His throat tightened, and he cleared it. "Can't you just live

forever?"

She laughed again, but this time it collapsed into a cough that sounded thick and wet. Jackson winced every time she made that sound, until finally she was able to breathe again.

"I would like that," Gran said. He could hear the smile in her voice. "But I'm blessed to have held onto my mind this whole time. These days, you never know. And my mother had dementia in her old age, so it was always a possibility. I know you don't want to dwell on this, dear, and I don't want you to. But I do need you to know what to expect."

"We can talk about all of this later, Gran," Jackson said. "There's a break coming up. I can come visit."

"That would be lovely," she said patiently, "but in the meantime, you need to know that you are the executor of my will. More than that… I know you don't want to be saddled with the farm, dear, and—"

"Gran, I will find a way to take care of the farm when you—"

"Hush," Gran said. "Nonsense. I want you to sell it. Oxford is going to be expensive, and I don't want you to live in debt your whole life just to get the education you need."

Sell the farm.

Jackson had grown up there. It was a part of him, even if he didn't spend much time there anymore. Just the thought of it, of handing it off to someone else…

"You are all the grandchild I need, Jackson," Gran said. "I never felt a lack. I wish that your father—and your mother, too—were the kind of people that could appreciate who you've become. I do, and I hope that's enough. Don't let this place hold you down. Let it lift you up. That's what I want my life to mean. Do you understand me?"

He had to talk around a lump. "Yeah, Gran. I understand."

"Good. Now, I'm an old lady and very tired, so I will have to leave you with that." There was a brief pause. "I love you so very, very much, Jackson. You have been the brightest light in my life. Always remember that."

Jackson was speechless. Not because of the words themselves —Gran had said them before—but because it sounded very much like good bye. "I'll see you soon, Gran," he said. "I promise. I love you, too."

"Good night, dear."

"Night, Gran."

She hung up, and Jackson sank onto the edge of his bed. He shouldn't wait until the break. He could get his assignments from his classes, and do them while he traveled. Only one of his classes was particularly challenging. The TA job was more complicated, but Matt

would probably let it slide, right?

At the moment, he was emotionally paralyzed. And when that happened, Jackson did what he had always been able to do. He threw himself into work and didn't come out until the storm had passed.

"I'm going to tell my Gran. Tonight." It was a furlough day, and Jackson was with Matt, one of the few times he'd ever been allowed to go to Matt's house. They'd been careful about it. Jackson had parked down the street, walked half a mile there, and worn a hat and baggy clothes. He felt like a criminal.

Now, he was naked, his head resting against Matt's hairy chest. He hadn't realized before how much he would like that. Matt had a thick pelt of fur that was just the right shape, barely reaching his shoulders, that turned into a swirling current of hair over his stomach which ultimately convened around his navel and disappeared behind the rim of his pants, when he was wearing them.

"You're going to tell her…?" Matt prompted.

"Not about us," Jackson said. "Don't worry. Though, in her day I'm sure it wasn't that uncommon. She got married at like fourteen."

"To her teacher?" Matt asked.

"Well, no," Jackson admitted. "But anyway, I'm not going to tell her about us. I want to come out. Not to everyone. Not yet. Just her."

"I think that's a brave thing to do," Matt said. "And I'm sure it will go better than you think."

Jackson shrugged. "Maybe. I think I don't care anymore. I just need to say it. So she knows."

Matt's fingers brushed Jackson's forehead and trailed down his cheek. He wanted to squirm like a kitten for more of that touch, but instead he turned his head to one side and let the trailing fingers find his neck and trace his collar bone.

"Do you think…" Jackson started.

Matt's fingers paused. "Do I think what?"

"Nothing," Jackson said. No reason to ruin a nice evening.

But Matt shifted a little, slipping sideways so that he could prop himself up on his elbow and look at Jackson. "Tell me. Anything you say is okay. You know that."

"Not anything," Jackson countered. "There are things we can't really talk about."

"Ah," Matt sighed.

"Yeah." Jackson shrugged and wiggled around so that he could sit up a little with the back of his head resting against Matt's thigh. "It would just be nice if we could feel like a normal couple. I'd love for you to meet my Gran, and I think she'd like you."

He knew the look on Matt's face by now—he had it all the time—

and waved a hand. "I know. Don't worry about it. I like what we've got. It's good. It's fun."

"I wish I could give you more, Jackson," Matt said.

"I know you do."

"So, how are you going to do it?" Matt asked.

Jackson rocked his head back and forth a few times, considering. He'd rehearsed it a thousand different ways. "I was thinking I might just tell her 'Hey, Gran, you know how you said I was always so good at picking corn? Well turns out I love grabbing big hard things. Like dick. I'm gay.' What do you think?"

"I think if she has feathers to ruffle, that'll do it," Matt mused. "Maybe say 'penis' instead of 'dick'. Seems less vulgar like that."

"Good point," Jackson chuckled. "No reason to be vulgar about it. Gran doesn't care for cussing."

Jackson smiled, and reached behind his neck to find Matt's soft flesh. He tugged on it, played with it. It was spent, but he didn't care. Matt's fingers trailed down Jackson's thigh in response, until they gently caressed his balls, a tight mound against the slight chill from the air conditioning. Jackson was spent, too, but he still got hard again, and then shivered when Matt licked his fingers and made slick circles around the head of Jackson's cock.

It was something Jackson loved. Just laying here, after they'd both gotten off one way or another. They hadn't had real sex yet; Matt insisted they wait a while. So Jackson contented himself with learning to give head the way Matt liked, and with learning what he liked from Matt. So far, he liked pretty much everything.

The bit of play passed, and Matt pulled Jackson to him and held him for a bit. "If you need me after you drop the bomb," he said, "I'll be here for you. Okay? I'll always be here when you need me."

"I know," Jackson said, eyes drooping a little as he relaxed into the heat that Matt put off, and the safety of his arms. "I know you will."

Chapter 8

Jackson sighed as he looked over the detailed syllabus for the next two weeks of Matt's class. Another Victorian novel? Really? It made more sense to keep going, to hit the next major literary period that occurred during and after the first world war. That was, in Jackson's opinion, when the originators of modern British literature really emerged from the shell of endless Victorian romance and commentary on the aristocracy. If you'd read one Victorian era book, you'd really read them all.

Matt tucked notes and his copy of Bleak House—Charles Dickens, and it wasn't awful (it was Dickens), but it was just a stone's throw from Sybil, culturally speaking—in his bag and glanced over at where Jackson was frowning at the syllabus. "Don't care for Thomas Hardy?" he asked.

Jackson looked up, and shuffled the papers in front of him together. "He's fine," he said. "I'm just surprised we're spending so much time in the period, that's all."

"Read ahead," Matt urged. "After that we get into the early twentieth century, the emergence of the middle class in England."

"Okay, but…" Jackson shook his head.

"No, go on," Matt said. He folded his arms over his chest, though, which was what he did when he was preparing to dig his heels in.

"You're set on it," Jackson said. He tucked papers into his bag. "We can talk about it later."

"We can, can we?" Matt chuckled. "You know, this *is* my class."

"That much is very clear," Jackson said. "Your love affair with Queen Victoria is all over it."

"It was a wide epoch of literature; there's a lot to cover," Matt insisted.

Jackson gave a courtly Victorian bow. "You're the boss, Lord Smith."

I can bring it up again later, he thought, and so with that he waved, and made a hasty retreat.

By the time he met with Matt in his office again, he'd had more time to prepare for the argument, and Matt was still eager to hear it.

"Look… from beginning to end, Victorian literature was just… stagnant," Jackson said when they'd gotten well and truly into it. He was pacing the office floor. "At best you needed two weeks before we moved on. Six weeks is excessive, and if you're going to get to the World War Two era you're going to have to skip right over World War

One and that's where all the good stuff was."

"Now," Matt said, holding up a hand, "just because the world wars are your preference, doesn't mean that's where the best literature was. Late nineteenth to earlier twentieth showed the greatest transformation of the style and ethos of British novelists and poets. The whole country was changing drastically, finally establishing a true middle class, and the wars certainly changed England politically and socially, but the current in literature started in the first years of the nineteen hundreds and as a direct reaction to climes of the Victorian era."

Jackson rolled his eyes. "How can you even say that?"

"Because I have a Ph.D. in the subject and you don't?" Matt offered.

"Oh. My. *God*. You are not holding your Ph.D. over me right now," Jackson said. "You can't just cut out a whole era of literature from a British Literature course, Matt."

"There is a whole other class devoted to military literature—"

"I can*not* listen to this," Jackson groaned. He held up his hands and counted off on his fingers. "Aldous Huxley. The entire Imagist movement. T.S. Elliot might have been American but he was immersed in England at the time. Hulme. It was the turning point! Everyone was obsessed with angst and death and they were becoming disillusioned with everything that came before. England was growing up, for Pete's sake!"

Matt was quiet, and watching him. There was a hint of a smile on his face.

"What?" Jackson snapped.

Another pause, and then Matt shook his head. "Nothing. You're not entirely wrong. What if we hit Wells next week, and then Huxley after that, and finish with post World War Two?"

It took Jackson a moment to realize that he'd won the argument. He hadn't gotten everything he wanted, though; not quite yet. He rounded the desk and looked down over Matt's instructor syllabus, frowning. He pointed. "I think we can do Huxley in a week and do a week on the Imagists."

Matt shrugged. "Alright. You can come up with the lesson plan for that week."

Jackson blinked. "Really?"

"Yes, really," Matt said. He was smiling. "I think it'll be good for you. And there's probably no one better to do it."

"I can write the whole week's worth of reading material, lectures, everything?" Jackson asked. "You're sure?"

"You can even deliver the lectures. I was never that familiar with the Imagist movement."

It was a massive nod of respect. Not that Matt had ever been anything but respectful of Jackson's interest in literature or his grasp of it but… somehow, for a moment, it felt like they were equals.

They were very close, just then. Jackson realized he could smell Matt's cologne or… no, that was just Matt's scent. Surely he must have encountered it lately. How could he have missed it? It brought back memories. So many of them. Just then, he was momentarily eighteen again, leaning his head against Matt's furry chest and breathing him in.

"We'd better get those papers graded," Matt said. It took a moment for either of them to move, though.

This time, Matt brought the wine. "I admit that you were right about this, too," he said.

Jackson smirked as Matt handed him a glass, and this time Matt didn't bother with more lies about how his smugness wasn't cute. If anything, he looked like he enjoyed it.

As before, they had their moments of contention, but Jackson was starting to get a feel for how Matt graded papers after the last round, and he was more confident in the grades he recommended. In a way, it was illuminating. Matt hadn't gone easy on Jackson in high school just because they were messing around. If anything, he'd leaned harder on him. Jackson had made A's on most of his papers for AP Lit, but he'd had to work for them.

The same was true now. No one was given an easy grade just because they got the facts right. It was more than a report; it was an exploration.

These papers were overall shorter, fortunately. "They all figure they've impressed you already," Jackson said. "I used to do the same thing, until I realized there was no way I could write papers that long for that many classes. They'll get shorter and shorter, I expect, until the final is bare minimum."

"It was like that when I was in college too," Matt mused. "Still, looks like some of them took the notes about style that you gave them."

Jackson shrugged. "If you're going to write you should do it well."

Matt just chuckled, and turned a paper over. He finished before Jackson did, by one paper, and when they were done there was still half a bottle of neglected wine. Until Matt emptied it into their two glasses.

"Waste not, want not," Jackson cheered. He sipped, and swirled the stuff around in the glass, watching the legs creep down the inside afterward. "So I'm going back to Texas soon."

"Why?" Matt asked, shocked.

Jackson shook his head, “Not to stay. But… I might need some time off the class. I can still put together a lesson plan, and I’ll be back in time for the lectures and papers.”

“Is everything okay back there?” Matt’s eyebrows were pinched together, concern evident. Well founded. There weren’t any other good reasons to go back, were there? Not to a place like Carlton.

“I don’t really know,” Jackson said. “Gran called me last weekend. She’s not doing well. So… I want to make sure I get to see her. Before… well, you know.”

Matt’s expression fell, and he looked as though he really did feel Jackson’s pain. “God. I’m so sorry, Jackson. I know how important to you she is. Of course, you can have time off if you need it. And I can even handle the lesson plan, I’ll just need to brush up—”

“No,” Jackson assured him, “I can do it. I’ll start working on it tomorrow, and have it ready so I don’t have to worry about it while I’m out of town. I don’t even really know when I’m going to go. I was going to wait until the break but I’ve just got this feeling in my gut, you know? That… that she’s… I just don’t want to miss the chance to see her again.” His eyes burned.

Matt stood from his chair, and came around the desk. He took Jackson’s hand, and pulled him up, wrapping his arms around Jackson in a long embrace. “I’m sorry, Jackson.”

“Thanks,” Jackson murmured against Matt’s shoulder. God, he could smell him now, even more than before. It mixed with the buzz of wine in his brain and made him unsteady, dizzy.

“Make whatever arrangements you need,” Matt said as they parted. They didn’t go very far. They were inches away from one another.

Matt’s hand was still lightly holding Jackson’s, like he’d forgotten to let go.

Old habits.

Asking permission had never been one of Jackson’s strong suits. He’d never quite gotten the hang of it. So he didn’t ask now. Instead, he just leaned forward, lifted up on his toes, and forgot everything for the few heartbeats that his lips touched Matt’s again, after such a long time.

It was radically different and profoundly the same. Past and present rushed together in his body, and he wasn’t sure who he was as all those old feelings finally got the signal they’d been waiting for and rushed out of wherever they’d been poorly hidden to cloud his brain.

It took several seconds for Matt to catch up, make a decision, and finally pull gently away. He was as breathless as Jackson was, though.

“Jackson, we…” He didn’t finish.

“I know,” Jackson said. “I know. I just needed… I don’t know. A taste of home? Better times?” He tore his eyes away from Matt’s lips, and looked at his feet instead.

He shouldn’t have. It made everything that much more difficult. Matt’s khakis bulged with his reaction to their moment of contact, and knowing it sparked the same fire in Jackson’s own body, his cock twitching and swelling quickly until his jeans were uncomfortable.

“We should call it a night,” Matt croaked. “I ah… I’ll see you in class.”

Jackson nodded quickly. “Monday,” he said. “Sure. Good night.”

He scooped his bag up and didn’t bother to put the strap over his shoulder. Instead, he just clutched it to his waist for half the walk home, until he’d relaxed.

Then he found a quiet place in the courtyard, sat down, and cried.

Chapter 9

Graduation day. It could just as well have been D-Day. Matt should have been proud of Jackson, and excited for him; he'd finished as valedictorian, and he already had acceptance letters from six schools. He could take his pick, and there was even a good chance he would be on scholarships all the way through his Bachelor's.

And Matt was proud, and he was excited.

But he was dreading it, too, and that dread tainted everything else with a gray pallor that managed to somehow manifest itself in the grey, dreary, overcast sky.

All the names were called, everyone walked, and Jackson made the graduation speech he'd been agonizing over for weeks. He nailed it, of course—the way he succeeded at everything else that he put his mind to. Jackson was a force of nature when he wanted something. It was going to make this very difficult.

After the students dispersed, Jackson approached him. His grandmother was in tow. This would be the first time Matt was introduced to her, and he was nervous about it. Not that Jackson would introduce Matt as his boyfriend, or anything. He hoped. But it was significant, and it meant that Jackson was thinking about what happened next.

"Hi… Mr. Smith," Jackson said, measuring his tone carefully. "This is my Gran, Eunice Greene. Gran, this is Mr. Smith."

Eunice extended a hand that looked frail but turned out to be surprisingly strong. She didn't sit back and let others tend her farm for her, he guessed. "Mr. Smith," she said approvingly, "Jackson has told me so much about you. You've made such a difference for him. Thank you for being such a wonderful teacher. Our community needs more like you."

Matt blushed, all the way down to his neck it felt like. She had no idea he was about to break Jackson's heart. "Uh, well I'm glad to see him succeeding. I'm sure he'll conquer college like he does everyone else. Everything, I mean."

Jackson bit his lip to keep from grinning.

"Thanks in no small part to your influence," Eunice said. She pulled Matt to her, and hugged him not like a stranger, but like an old friend. "Thank you. From the bottom of my heart."

Matt was speechless, so when she released him he just dipped his head.

"Gran, can I have a word with Mr. Smith alone?" Jackson asked.

Eunice patted Jackson on the shoulder, repeated her thanks to Matt, and then picked out some parent from the crowd and went to speak with them. In a town like Carlton she probably knew all the students' parents and grandparents, Matt imagined.

"Walk with me?" Jackson asked quietly.

"We still have to be careful," Matt said, almost too quiet to be heard. "I still have a job here."

"I didn't say hold my hand," Jackson said. "Just walk with me. Congratulate me on stuff."

"Congratulations, Jackson," Matt said. He turned when Jackson started to wander toward the parking lot, and fell into an easy stroll beside him.

"So… I'm no longer your student," Jackson said, coy and hopeful. "For all anyone would know, we just reconnected after school. There's an age thing, I guess, but you're not really that much older than me."

"Well," Matt said stiffly, "there are… things to consider."

"We can keep it secret like it is for a few months," Jackson reasoned. "It would definitely look weird if we like started 'dating' tomorrow. Maybe like six months?"

"Jackson—"

"I know, I know; you're not out. It's not like I want you to propose to me with a flash mob in the middle of town." He smiled up at Matt and winked. "Though, if you do, my guilty pleasure songs are all in my Facebook feed, so, do some research."

Proposal. Jesus. This was going to hurt.

Matt put a hand on Jackson's shoulder. Not tenderly, like a lover delivering bad news, but companionably, like a teacher with a student that had just graduated. The way it was supposed to be. He had to take a long breath and steady himself.

"Jackson," he said. Nothing else came out. Another breath. "I'm very proud of you. And… I have four more years on my contract with Carlton High." That hadn't come out right.

Jackson just shrugged. "Okay? So, I can go to Base for a few years and then transfer to Morris when your contract is up. It's not going to make a difference—"

"We need to end this, Jackson." Best to rip the Band-Aid off, wasn't it? That's what you always heard.

Jackson's face froze, and then gradually went slack until it was completely expressionless. His eyes held Matt's for a moment, and then angled off to the side so he didn't have to. "That's… pretty sudden." Reading his face and tone were impossible. When Jackson shut down, it was all the way.

"I've been thinking about it for a long time," Matt said as his guts twisted. He wanted to vomit, he was so sick with guilt. His lungs had become lead. "I think you need to be able to move on. Go out into the world, go to Morris out of the gate and not be held down by me. I'm the only person you've been with and I think you should be able to be free to have the college experience, see other—"

"I don't want other men," Jackson said. "I don't need the 'college

experience', whatever that is. Matt, you're the only one that I want or need to be with. Please don't do this to me."

"You'll grow out of me," Matt started. It was very quickly obvious that it was the wrong thing to say.

Jackson's face went from flat to furious in a second. "Because I'm a kid, right? Eighteen, but still basically a baby, with no idea what I want or who I am? Is that the real problem? I'm not a student anymore, so, what —it's not hot now? It's not forbidden anymore. Boring. If that's it you could just say it, Matt."

"No, Jackson that's not—"

Jackson's hands came up. "No. I don't even… just…" He couldn't finish. Instead, he shook his head slowly, red-faced and so clearly trying not to cry that Matt's own eyes burned with tears he wasn't as good as Jackson at holding back.

And then Jackson turned and left, the heels of his shoes—nice ones that Matt had bought for him just for this occasion, because he couldn't help it, and Jackson lamented of not having 'grown up' shoes—tap-tapping rapidly away. Even over the white noise of the still-chattering crowd, Matt could hear them for a long time on the white pavement of the school's walkways. He'd hear the same sound echoing for six years.

It was the right thing to do, he thought. It had to have been.

"Mr. Smith," Deanna Mason said from across her pale maple desk, smiling. "I'm glad we could meet. How are you finding the class?"

Deanna Mason, an imposing fifty-something year old woman with a streak of white shocking her black hair, who had three PhD's and two postdoctoral degrees that covered nearly the breadth of the literary world and history, was the director of Rose State's English and Literature department. She had curated Matt personally, which was both flattering and terrifying. Now, she had a nearly predatory look on her face. *Though I really haven't seen any other look on her face, come to think of it,* Matt thought.

She wasn't really a difficult woman to deal with, but she was forceful. Professor Mason had a plan for Rose State's English department and she was ruthless in carrying that plan out. She hadn't taken no for an answer when she invited Matt to take over a class for Professor Layton. Now, she wanted to know that her choice had been one that moved her agenda forward, not back.

"It's going very well," Matt said honestly. "I've been pleasantly surprised by some of the students. Most of them, I'd say, in fact. You've got some really fantastic young people here, and the discussion has been lively and fun. I hope they've been saying good things, too."

"Well, we don't want them to say too many good things,"

Deanna said with a wink. “Otherwise the class is probably too easy.”

Matt chuckled, and bobbed his head once. “Right. I hope that isn’t the case.”

“And your TA? Jackson Greene? How are you finding him?”

Probably it was nothing. Probably, Matt was just on edge after both having spoken to Tessa and then having been unable to bring himself to stop Jackson from kissing him. But was there a hint of something accusatory or… suspicious there?

“Fine. He’s great,” Matt said, aware of how clipped he’d said it only after the fact. He searched for more to say, but the thread of panic threatened to trip him up. “We get along fine. I mean not too fine. I try to challenge him. He’s been a great help.”

Deanna pursed her lips and leaned back in her chair. “I understand you taught him in High School?”

“Oh,” Matt said. His mouth was dry, and he took a sip of the water Deanna had offered him when he arrived. It was the first time he’d picked the glass up. “Yes. I did. I wrote his recommendation letter, in fact.”

“Yes, I saw that when I was going over Mr. Greene’s file.” She lifted a folder on her desk and set it down. “I’m considering writing my own recommendation for him. You know he’s looking to get into Oxford?”

“I’d heard,” Matt said.

“I would very much like to see him come back here after he’s done,” Deanna said. “He’s excelled here consistently since he arrived.”

“I imagine that’s the case. He is a driven young man. Very talented.”

Deanna was quite a moment, and seemed to appraise Matt. That predatory look again. That’s what it was—she was always weighing and judging everyone, probably. Surely she wasn’t trying to assess whether Matt and Jackson were somehow personally involved with one another. They hadn’t done anything to give that impression, had they? He found himself replaying every public interaction.

“I understand the two of you have spent some late nights in your office,” she said finally. That was all she said.

The lack of any follow up made for an awkward pause while Matt waited and realized there wasn’t going to be a follow up question. “Yes,” he said. “We have. He’s been helping grade papers. We have different views on the basis for scoring, but I’ve found that to be a benefit. He’s highly technical, where I look for creativity and thoughtfulness. So we complement one another well.” He wanted to ask what she’d heard—had some of the rumors from Carlton made their way here? Deanna had certainly checked his references—but asking would have given away that there was something to have

heard so he controlled the urge.

"I have no doubt he's been an excellent assistant," Deanna said, "I just want to ensure that he has time for his other classes and isn't overly stressed. Jackson is the sort of student that could go on to bring this university wide acclaim."

Matt silently breathed a sigh of relief, inward, where Deanna wouldn't see it. Outwardly he held his breath for half a second and then nodded. "Of course. Believe me, I am as invested in Jackson as you are."

"I'm glad we agree," she said pleasantly, almost.

Speaking of Jackson, there were another round of papers to grade. "I'm glad we could check in," Matt said. "Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?"

"As a matter of fact," Deanna said, "there is. Consider all of this the preamble to why I wanted to meet. There has been a development that I think you should be aware of."

Here it was. Matt's chest tightened. She had heard something. It would probably just be a warning, otherwise she would have brought it up immediately and likely dismissed him right away, or at least let him know this term would be his last. Not just at Rose State but probably anywhere else in the country.

"Tim's sabbatical has turned somewhat suddenly into retirement," Deanna said. Matt nearly laughed, but didn't. "He will be missed, and his position in my department was critical."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," Matt said.

"Well," Deanna said, "don't be too sorry. I haven't made a decision, but, you are under consideration to replace him."

"Replace him," Matt repeated.

Deanna nodded. "That is what I said."

"Tim was tenured…?"

She smiled, and spread her hands. "He was. As will be his replacement. Whoever that is."

It took the air out of his lungs. It could take years to snag a tenured position at a university. To have it on the table after a single term was… well it was unreal; Matt had to check himself to make sure this wasn't a dream. "I… don't know what to say."

"Say that you'll do your best to make the top of the list," Deanna said. "Nothing is decided. I'm having to fight the dean and president for it—to tenure an instructor outright, that is—but I need to fortify my department. Already the board has been whispering about cutting it back." She looked disgusted enough to spit.

"I understand," Matt said. "And I will do my utmost not to let you down. I can't tell you how much even your consideration means to me, Deanna, it's… more than I could have hoped for."

“Good,” she said. “Do your best, keep your nose clean, avoid scandal, and don’t go easy on your students.”

Avoid scandal. Right. Good advice.

They shook hands, exchanged the basic pleasantries that seemed almost out of place around all of this—as if she hadn’t just offered to change Matt’s life forever, or at least said she was thinking about it—and Matt left the department head’s office light headed and in need of somewhere he could let the knot of emotion in him out privately, where dignity wouldn’t matter.

Some of that emotion twisted and dropped when he found himself looking forward to sharing the news with Jackson.

Avoid scandal? He was doing a bang up job so far.

Chapter 10

With mid-terms approaching, Jackson reconsidered taking up an Adderall habit that so many other type-A students seemed to rely on at times. It was a more or less yearly debate he had with himself, and like every year before this one he ultimately took the wiser, more responsible path and simply cut his sleep in half. A person could live on four hours of sleep and lots of coffee for a few weeks.

The cost, however, was a lack of properly organized scheduling. He got a text from Matt while he laid in bed with a book and his laptop after going into something of a study trance.

"Past eight. Grading?"

"Shit," Jackson muttered. He'd lost track of time. Probably Trevor would have something to say about unconsciously distancing himself from Matt as well out of a fear of reliving the pain of their breakup, but Trevor didn't know what he was talking about, so he could stuff it. Hypothetically. Jackson hadn't told him about the kiss because he suspected Trevor wouldn't want to know, and because he anticipated that very conversation if he were to find out. Not to mention all the rest that would come attached.

"On my way," he sent back. He shuffled off the bed, put his laptop away and slipped a bookmark into the textbook. He could catch up later.

Rather than rushing to gather his things and leave, though, he found himself hesitating. Already, part of him was giddy and excited to see Matt again, and to maybe take another step. The kiss had been good, but painful.

But mostly good.

Jackson groaned, and rubbed his face. It had been over a week and Matt hadn't said a single word about it. Not that they'd spent any real time alone since then. Ever since, there had been a new/old tension in his stomach and chest—tightening every day, urging him to make another move, to find excuses to be alone, even to ignore his books and papers to make it happen. It was distracting, and only getting worse.

What he really needed was to get it out of his system.

The suddenness and hurt of their breakup aside, there was unfinished business with Matt and that was what had Jackson swimming in his fantasies instead of focusing on his work. They'd had an intense six-month affair in high school, and they had explored lots of things. But in all that time, Jackson had never convinced Matt to have sex with him. All the way, home base, full penetration sex, anyway. They'd done just about everything else Jackson wanted to do, but that bit had been off limits for Matt.

It was supposed to have been a post-graduation thing, but… well, obviously that hadn't worked out.

Funny how he could go for years without getting obsessed with that missing piece and now, after being around the man for only a couple of months, it already consumed his thoughts every bit as much as it had back then. Like some part of him had stayed eighteen, suspended pristinely under the ice of emotional trauma, and was now thawed out and hadn't aged a day.

He was dressed already, just jeans and a tee shirt. Plenty good enough for grading papers. But he changed anyway. Nicer slacks. Button up. Slate gray blazer, vest and tie. He threw something in his hair, messed with it a bit until it was suitably sexy. No promises, of course, but Matt had always liked it when Jackson dressed up for him. Hell, Matt had been the first one to help him pick out a real suit. They'd had to drive two hours away, to a mall where no one would know them, and that only after Jackson begged.

It was silly. He looked ridiculous. Better just go with jeans and a tee shirt.

Jackson's phone chimed, probably Matt asking what was taking so long. Christ, it had already been half an hour while he preened like a giddy school girl—which, he had to admit, wasn't far off the mark.

Meet at my place, the text read. *Left half the papers at home. Dumb. See you soon.*

There was an address attached, too.

Jackson bit his lip, checked himself in the mirror again… and left wearing the suit. He typed his reply on his way out of his building.

On my way.

Jackson took note of the reaction he saw when Matt opened the door to his townhouse, one of several scattered around the edge of campus and granted to tenured and guest instructors alike. Matt was struck dumb for just a moment as he looked Jackson over. Probably it brought back memories. The night Matt had taken each piece of clothing off of Jackson, one at a time, right after they'd gotten him the outfit. It was the memory Jackson was reminded of, anyway.

"There's… ah… I made coffee," Matt said. He cleared his throat, and stepped back. "Come on in."

Jackson did, and looked around the place. Stock furniture and wall art; nothing fancy, though the place was smartly painted. Cozy, relaxing, academic. It was a little like the offices on campus, just expanded to fill an entire townhouse. A very professorial theme. There was even a library in the study, full of books that possibly had never been taken off the shelves. Professors tended to travel with their own

collections. Or with a Kindle, these days.

"Nicer than your last place," he said.

Matt laughed quietly. "That place is still my place, technically. I haven't put in on the market yet."

"Yet?" Jackson wondered.

"Everything is still sort of in the air," Matt said. "I haven't really decided yet."

It was difficult not to read into that.

"Coffee?" Matt asked.

"Please," Jackson said. "Where are we working?"

"Just in there." Matt pointed to the living room, where a broad, low coffee table was already littered with papers, some in neat stacks and others in looser, fresher ones. "I've been working on them already."

"Great," Jackson said. He let Matt leave to the kitchen and settled into the paisley printed, maroon couch.

As he picked through the papers that had already been graded, Matt arrived with two cups of coffee. "Just sugar," he told Jackson as he handed him his cup.

"Good memory," Jackson muttered.

Matt didn't comment. He just took his seat and set his cup on the table.

No one said anything right away. Both of them picked up a paper each, seeming to read it but not making any marks on the page.

"Listen, Matt—" Jackson started, but Matt spoke at the same time.

"We should talk about—"

Both of them began again, and Jackson shook his head and waved Matt on.

After a slight pause, Matt went first. "We should talk about what happened. Before, in the office."

"When I kissed you," Jackson clarified.

"Yes," Matt said. "That. We… our relationship needs to be professional here. I'm a teacher, you're a student."

"This all sounds familiar," Jackson said softly, smiling a little even though his nerves were stretched taut. "Are we going to play out the same history again, or just the greatest hits?"

"We don't need to go through it all again," Matt said. "We're past that, aren't we? And this… it's a bigger deal now. The stakes are higher. For both of us."

"I guess a high school student can't really be considered culpable," Jackson agreed.

"No," Matt said. "And I've got a lot to lose here. Professor Mason is considering me for tenure. To replace Professor Layton; he's

not coming back from sabbatical. He's decided to retire."

"Must have been some sabbatical," Jackson said. There was a bit of a thrill in his stomach, butterflies fluttering with excitement. "Matt that's… that's incredible."

"More than incredible," Matt said. "It never happens. To anyone. I almost don't believe it, but Professor Mason is serious about her department and has an agenda to push. It's not guaranteed to be me. But she did make a point to tell me I was being considered. This could be the job I retire from."

Jackson was smiling. Matt deserved this. He was brilliant, and an incredible teacher, and so passionate about the subject; he was exactly the sort of instructor any college should have. It was easy to be happy for him. But Jackson was proud, too.

"So, we have to take a step back," Matt said.

It did take a little wind out of Jackson's sails, but not all of it.

"I get that," he said. "I do. Let me tell you where I'm at." Here went nothing. "I want you, Matt. I think it about it constantly. I can barely focus on my studies, and I lose track of time. I barely sleep at night. I'm being pulled in ten different directions it feels like, and I can't give anything the kind of attention I want to. I need to visit my grandmother, I need to get papers written, I need to pass midterms. I need to arrange letters of recommendation to Oxford. I have a lot on my plate.

"And normally, I can handle all of it," he said when Matt winced apologetically. "It's not your fault. Well… not immediately. But you and I… we have unfinished business."

"No, Jackson we—"

"We do," Jackson insisted. He slid closer to Matt. "I know you think so, too. I know you've been distracted. That you've been thinking about it."

"It's just nostalgia, Jackson," Matt said.

Jackson put a hand on Matt's knee, experimentally. Matt didn't take it away, didn't move his knee. He froze a little. Struggling, Jackson knew, with restraint and desire and which one he should side with. That had always been the way with him. Maybe it was underhanded to leverage that particular weakness, but Jackson couldn't bring himself to care.

"If we could just get it out of our system," Jackson said, lowering his voice as he leaned in a bit, squeezed Matt's knee. His hand moved up Matt's thigh a few inches. "If we could just get past this little hiccup, we'll both feel better."

"It would just make things worse," Matt said. He licked his lips, and swallowed loudly.

"I can't speak for you," Jackson said, "but I'm stressed. Like, at

risk for a heart attack stressed. You have to be too, with all this going on."

"Having to worry about someone finding out about us isn't going to make it better," Matt argued. "It'll make it worse."

Jackson moved his hand further up. He was inches away from what he could already tell was Matt's growing bulge. He turned his body and drew one knee up onto the couch. "No one has to find out. It's not unusual for students and instructors to spend time together in college. Just one time, Matt. Please?"

Now, Matt was trying not to look at him. He shifted a little in his seat. His pulse pounded visibly in his neck. There was a tuft of hair barely visible peeking out from his collar the nape of his neck. It was only a little thing, a hint, but it made Jackson's body ache to be naked against Matt's. His fingers brushed Matt's cock through the fabric of his slacks.

"Jackson," Matt whispered, a note of pleading desperation in his tone that could have been a plea to stop, or a plea for him to keep going.

"Touch me, Matt," Jackson urged. He took Matt's hand and pressed it to his cheek. "Please. Just let me finally have this."

Still Matt had the opportunity to stop it. He could pull his hand away and say no. And if he had, Jackson would have dropped it. For now, anyway. But he didn't, and so Jackson slipped his hand down between Matt's thighs to cup his bulge, which was hard enough that Jackson could feel the older man's pulse through it.

Matt breathed heavily, and one of those breaths came out a groan. He was breaking down. He wanted this just as much as Jackson did.

A little further, then. Jackson found Matt's belt buckle, undid it. No intervention. He unbuttoned his pants, and drew this zipper down over the hump of Matt's trapped erection. Matt glanced down, then closed his eyes, and swallowed hard.

"What are you doing?" Matt asked. Funny; he'd always been the older, more experienced one, but he always seemed more nervous than Jackson was. Maybe because Jackson still had the benefit of excitement over danger instead of the fear of consequences that was probably a side effect of getting older.

Well, maybe he just wasn't old enough to care yet.

He bent over his leg, lowering his mouth to the taut fabric. He could smell a day's worth of musk, a heady, clean-sweat scent that took him way, way back. He opened his mouth and gnawed gently at the rock hard shaft underneath.

"Jackson, please," Matt said. "You… you can't do this."

Jackson's fingers found the edge of Matt's briefs—a marked

upgrade from his old boxers, but without the convenient buttoned opening in the front—and gasped when Matt's cock sprang free and stood straight up.

It had always been Jackson's favorite. He hadn't been with very many men, and he hadn't wasted much time watching porn—he was tactile, more than visual, so porn just didn't really do it for him—but Matt's cock was beautiful. Perfectly proportioned, thick enough to be fun but not so thick it was dangerous. That cleanly swept, symmetrical helmet head that was already moist at the tip. Perfectly straight, with soft skin barely marred by the classic circumcision scar that Jackson lacked.

Jackson parted his lips and pressed them to the base of it, his tongue slipping out and gliding over it in slow circles as he traveled up the length of it to the leaking, salty prize at the top.

"Jackson, don't," Matt pleaded, helpless to stop it apparently but insistently doing due diligence anyway. "Please, baby, I can't—"

He gasped around whatever he was going to say when Jackson's lips sealed around his cock head. Jackson's body tingled, and his eyes fluttered closed as he gave a short, quiet moan of delight—with a swell, Matt gushed a small shot of precome into Jackson's waiting mouth, salty and musky and sweet. It was like a drug, pouring into his system and sweeping away the rest of his patience in the sudden craving for more.

"Oh, god…" Matt breathed, and his fingers threaded into the hair on the back of Jackson's head as he pushed gently down.

Tension between them snapped, finally pulled too tightly to stay intact, and the wall between them crumbled. Jackson sank Matt into his mouth, all the way to the back of his throat and then past it by an inch. It wasn't his forte, deep throating, but somehow it fit there perfectly. His tongue curled and undulated against the thick shaft, and he imagined remaining right there, suckling until Matt came for him.

But, he did need air. He came up, and pulled the elastic down and around Matt's balls—trimmed, he noted, so maybe he had been thinking about this just as much as Jackson had, the liar—and then left it there so he could wrap his fingers in a loose grip around Matt's cock and tug the tight skin up as he rose, just like Matt taught him six years before.

Matt's hips thrust up, begging to be back inside, and Jackson took him in again, and between them they established an easy, slow rhythm to the sound of Matt's groaning.

"Jesus, baby," Matt husked, "I forgot how fucking good that feels… holy shit… I'm so close…"

The temptation to get him off was overwhelming. Jackson wanted it so desperately, to taste Matt again, that he sped up just

slightly, and tightened his grip, and let the head of Matt's cock pass through his fist when he came up with a little twist that was the key to making Matt come for him quickly.

But just as Matt's groaning changed pitch, and he gave the telltale signs that he was about to blow—thighs trembled, cock swelling, balls tightening; that continuous, delicious drip of precome that filled Jackson's mouth with the taste—Jackson paused, and slowly pulled off.

The look in Matt's eyes. It was priceless. Hard edge need, blatant and hot, pleading not to be left this way, not to abandon him when he needed release.

Jackson, though, had a bone to pick. He had a need to fulfill, a plan; a final exam. And he'd been doing his homework for six years. He tugged at Matt's hand and the two of them stood up.

"Take me to bed," he whispered into Matt's mouth. "Take me." He kissed him. It was hot, and warm, their lips electric when they touched, their tongues invading and savage. "Fuck me. Make love to me."

Matt's hands slipped around Jackson's waist and pulled him close, his cock grinding into Jackson's own aching swell. They settled on his ass, and tugged as though trying to part his cheeks through his slacks.

"Just the once," Matt grunted.

"Just once," Jackson agreed.

Matt sighed against another kiss. "Fuck," he muttered. "You always fucking do this."

Jackson smiled, and drew Matt away, toward the hall.

Before they reached it, though, Matt pulled on Jackson's arm, put it over his shoulder and then, with a small effort, bent and scooped him off of the ground to carry him down the hall toward the bedroom.

Chapter 11

Jackson had been kidding himself by thinking it could just be relief; that it could be something purely physical, something to get out of the way. When Matt put his feet on the ground, and kissed him again, and then nibbled his ear, and his neck while his fingers undid the buttons of Jackson's vest and shirt and then slid beneath the thin cotton to graze his skin… it was like flying, and like coming home.

Every part of him grew hot. Sweat beaded between his shoulder blades, and when Matt bent toward his chest, pulling his shirt aside to expose his nipple, and then pressed his lips to it and nibbled it, Jackson's knees began to buckle. "Matt… god… please, fuck me baby, please…"

Matt growled around the nipple and dug his fingers into Jackson's sides, forcing him back with little effort onto the bed until he toppled backward onto it. And then Matt was on top of him, spreading Jackson's knees with his own and tugging at Jackson's tie.

His vest and shirt were cast aside, and when Jackson was naked from the waist up he squirmed under Matt's caressing fingers. His back arched off the bed to meet them when they lifted barely off his skin, a cat begging for more attention.

Matt watched him move, a smile on his lips that was almost sad, or regretful, or perhaps nostalgic. Or all of those things. "You're so beautiful," he whispered.

"Had you forgotten?" Jackson asked, wiggling his clothed hips against Matt's cock.

"No," Matt said. "I never forgot you."

Jackson reached for his own pants to get them off, but Matt intercepted him and held his hands back. "Not yet," he said. "Slow. Remember?"

And with agonizing slowness, Matt shifted forward and bent to kiss Jackson's chest, and trailed soft kisses down his sides, over his stomach, and over the barely exposed hollows of his hips while Jackson heaved and twisted from the tickle of it. When Matt bit down on his side, just above his hip, a sensitive place that he clearly remembered, Jackson gasped and nearly sat up as his body tried to curl around the sensation of it. "Baby! Please!"

A throaty chuckle was the only response he got to his begging at first, and then another lingering bite. Finally, Matt plucked at Jackson's button and zipper, but it seemed to take long minutes for them to come away, and he followed the zipper down with his wet mouth and warm breath, kissing and breathing through the cotton briefs Jackson wore.

"You wanted it," Matt said. "Remember that. I tried to turn

you down."

"You didn't try very hard—oh… god… Matt… yes…" Jackson's body melted as Matt released him from his briefs and swallowed him down, his stubble grazing the top of the tight mound of his balls, the warm, wet muscle of Matt's tongue massaging all of his cock. In terms of size, Matt had him beat by a lot; probably Matt never felt quite as enveloped by Jackson's mouth as Jackson did in Matt's. It was thundering bliss that seized his body and tightened every muscle until he was rigid and struggling to breathe. His fingers found Matt's hair and tangled in it, clawing at his scalp as Matt's growling, hungry mouth played him.

The pounding honey in his veins turned to lightning, though, when Matt laid a strong fore arm over Jackson's waist and with his other hand drew the foreskin back from the hidden cap of his dick and swirled his tongue around it.

Jackson howled and pulled at Matt's hair. The sensitive flesh shook his body, and wrenched a series of long, mewling cries from his throat. "No, Matt, please… too much… baby, please, no…" The whining was overtaken with giddy, manic laughter. He probably couldn't have pulled Matt off of him by force anyway, but the way his cock head crippled him, robbing him of whatever strength he did have, he was entirely helpless but to endure until Matt was done with him.

He was, soon enough, just as Jackson was certain he was going to pass out from it. Matt lifted his face, grinning wicked triumph.

"You're an asshole," Jackson muttered.

For that, he got another long minute of it.

Matt sat up, after doling out the punishment Jackson's mouth had earned him, and finally pulled Jackson's slacks and briefs off, along with his socks, in one rough go. He took his own shirt off then as well, exposing that beautiful furred chest, now notably speckled with just the lightest spattering of gray, and pushed his pants down to his ankles and kicked them off.

Then he was on Jackson, the weight and warmth of him intoxicating, his arms encircling the younger man and pressing him tight against his chest. Jackson writhed against him, delighted in the feel of that course hair against his own smooth body, and clawed his fingers over Matt's back and shoulders while they kissed.

Matt's hips thrust, grinding his bigger cock against Jackson's, prodding and rubbing, and Jackson worked his own hips as well until he had Matt's girth slipping beneath his spit slicked balls and in between his thighs. Between the saliva and sweat there, it was almost slick enough for Matt to thrust into. They lingered like that for some time, languishing in mutual need held off in favor of a longer kiss and

this teasing simulation of what Jackson really wanted.

Jackson lost patience, though, before Matt did. “I’m ready,” he breathed into Matt’s mouth, around his tongue. “I need you, Matt. Inside me. Now.”

In answer, Matt’s fingers swept down Jackson’s spine and found the mounds of his ass, and spread his cheeks. Fingers probed between them, and one of them grazed his hole. “Here?” he asked.

Jackson whimpered, nodding, nibbling Matt’s lower lip. “Please, baby…”

“How do you like it?” Matt asked.

Jackson struggled with how to answer. He’d fantasized so many times, but when it came right down to it he didn’t entirely know what to expect. He’d never even had a sex toy before—the thought of his roommate finding it had kept the idea far, far away; Trevor would never let him live it down—and although he’d been with a few men…

“I don’t really know,” Jackson said, flushing with embarrassment. “I haven’t actually… I mean there just hasn’t been anyone I really, you know… wanted to…”

Matt stiffened, and drew back just enough that he could look at Jackson in the eye. He looked baffled. “You’re still—well I mean I can’t really call you a virgin in every sense I guess but—what, you haven’t had sex yet?”

“No,” Jackson admitted.

“Really?”

Now, he was getting more annoyed than self-conscious. “Yes, really, Matt. Why would I make that up?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ruffle your feathers. Just… I guess I just expected you to have crossed that particular bridge already.”

It sounded very much like Matt was going to decline crossing it for him. “Is that a problem?”

Matt, though, softened at once, and pulled Jackson back into a long, deep kiss. When he drew away, he shook his head. “No, Jackson, it’s not a problem.”

“I don’t want to wait any longer,” Jackson told him.

Matt laughed quietly, and nudged Jackson’s nose with his own. “I’m not going to make you wait. Scamp. We just have to go slow. My, ah, equipment isn’t exactly first time friendly.”

“Wow,” Jackson said, rolling his eyes. “Just wow. I mean your big and everything, we get it. Try not to break me in two.”

The finger that was still between his cheeks pressed in, massaging, not so far that it hurt, but enough to be a warning. “Be nice,” Matt muttered. He nipped Jackson’s lower lip. “I’m just looking out for you. Turn over. On your stomach.”

Jackson stole another kiss, but did as he was told.

Matt got behind him and on top, and Jackson put his arms up and under his head, clutching a pillow as much for a kind of anchor as for comfort's sake.

Kisses started at his shoulders and winded down his back, over his spine, and then at the nape of his back, and finally over first one cheek and then the other. Matt spread his cheeks apart then, and his lips brushed the inside of each of them, making his way slowly deeper until finally Jackson's breath caught and he lifted his hips to meet Matt's tongue as it darted out and tickled around his unexplored hole.

It seemed impossible there could be so many nerves there. It wasn't like Jackson had never lubed up a finger and played around with it but this was different. Whole worlds of sensation lived and died in every swipe of Matt's exploring, probing tongue as it dipped and massaged and speared, and Jackson was glad for the pillow because it muffled his plaintive howling every time a new surge of pleasure hit him.

Something hard and slick prodded him, and he gasped from the brief sting when it pressed through his ring briefly.

"Relax," Matt told him. "Just try to breathe and relax."

Jackson breathed, and tried to relax just as his teacher told him to—a different kind of teacher now, maybe, but instructor nonetheless—and while he did Matt pressed the finger back into him slowly, massaging the fine muscles that clenched around it as he did. It seemed to take forever, but the pain of it did pass by degrees, until finally a new, deeper kind of sensation took its place. It wasn't yet the kind of feeling Jackson had always imagined it would be, but it was a unique kind of relaxing, yielding sort of thing that seemed to make his whole body melt in response.

"You okay?" Matt asked.

Jackson could only groan an affirmative. He moved his hips, arching the small of his back to give the older man easier access and in response Matt slipped the digit further inside him.

"Tell me if this hurts," Matt said. "It can be painful the first time if you aren't used to it."

Jackson was going to say that it didn't hurt at all, but that was until he realized what exactly his teacher meant. It wasn't the insertion of a finger. It was what came next. And it didn't hurt at all, but he still couldn't speak.

Matt found some place inside of him—intellectually, he knew it was his prostate, but it didn't seem possible for that little gland to make that kind of noise in his nervous system—and prodded it, and Jackson's vision blanked momentarily as a lightning bolt of searing pleasure burned through him, curled his toes and drove him instantly to the brink of some madness that he'd never imagined he could feel.

He wailed through it, and bucked his hips back to beg for more. Matt obliged, chuckling, and bit one of Jackson's ass cheeks as he did. His finger wiggled and rubbed, prodded and stroked, and an overwhelming need to urinate seemed to build up to such a peak that Jackson reached back to stop Matt before things got mortifying. "Stop," he gasped, "stop, Matt—Jesus, I think you hit my bladder or something."

Matt laughed. His finger withdrew, slowly, and he was still laughing when he laid more kisses on Jackson's butt. "It's been so long since my first time," he explained, when Jackson shot him a look to wither. "You won't piss, baby. But I don't want to make you come that way. Another time."

Instead, he crawled up Jackson's body, his ascent marked by wet kisses just as his descent had been, and when Jackson turned his head and lifted it to kiss him he tasted himself on his mouth. It wasn't what he'd thought it would taste like, thankfully.

Matt slipped his cock between Jackson's cheeks, and the saliva still there made it slick enough that he could thrust up between them, massaging Jackson's hole with the head of it. "I want to be inside you," he whispered.

"Please," Jackson begged. "I'm ready, baby. I want it so bad…"

Matt grunted, and thrust again, this time hard enough to slip the head of his cock through the tight outer ring. It stung, again, from the thickness of it; but this time Jackson breathed, and pushed, and the pain subsided in only a moment.

"Don't move," Matt said. He leaned to one side, reaching for something, and opened a drawer. With some straining, he retrieved whatever he was looking for, probably lube—Jackson hoped, at least—and then his weight shifted back and moved his cock out of the cleft of Jackson's ass.

Something cool drizzled over Jackson's exposed hole, and a moment later Matt was on him again, grinding and spreading the slick stuff around until he reached down and angled himself for entry.

He wrapped one arm around Jackson's shoulders, holding him tight, and rolled both of them onto one side so that they were spooned close. His breath was hot in Jackson's ear. "Tell me if I need to stop," he said. "If we need to stop, it's okay."

Jackson nodded once, and then turned his head to nuzzle Matt's neck as he felt his teacher's cock start the slow journey in.

It took time. Half an inch by half an inch, Matt worked himself in, and then withdrew; back in, back out, deeper each pass. To Jackson's reeling surprise, it didn't hurt at all. After the finger and the first foray, he'd expected it to. Matt, though, opened him expertly, with patience and a gentle, massaging motion with his hips, stirring

Jackson's insides briefly before he withdrew.

"Good?"

Jackson couldn't answer with words. He drifted, and whined something like an affirmative, wiggling his hips back to take more. It was the signal Matt must have needed because he clutched Jackson tightly around the chest and waist and slid the rest of the way in.

His cock brushed that sensitive gland inside, and set Jackson on fire again. He moved his hips, pulling himself almost off before he pressed himself back down again. He felt like he could almost get some magical angle that was almost… there—he slid down Matt's body just a hair and when he worked his hips back again he felt that small quake of quivering sensation travel from deep inside him up to the very tip of his cock. "Fuck," he breathed. "Matt… holy fuck, how does it feel that good?"

Matt breathed against his ear, suckled his earlobe, and husked out something incoherent. Jackson took that as a commentary. It was just as good for Matt as it was for him.

More, Matt's fingers dug into Jacksons hips, trying to hold him back when he pulled off the iron rod that was lodged inside him. "Wait," Matt muttered.

"What?" Jackson asked, pushing back down until Matt was as far in as it was possible to get. He pulled off again, faster this time, and slammed his hips back. His own cock leapt, tingling, and a thick bead of precome blossomed from the tip and dripped onto the bed. "Does it feel good, baby?"

"Slow down," Matt said.

Jackson didn't—he sped up, finding a smooth rhythm that quickly had him leaking continuously. He was close to something, the edge of a kind of orgasm he'd never felt before, but it could only be that. It was deep inside him, wound up into a pulsing ball that was about to burst from the pressure. Matt grunted into his ear. His hands held on to Jackson's hips and struggled to keep them still.

"No, Jackson; wait, just stop for a second," Matt begged.

"Or what?" Jackson groaned. God, he was so close to getting that pressure to burst free. He swirled his hips, rocked them back and forth, grinding Matt's cock against that magic spot with a desperate need to push himself over. He hadn't even touched himself, though there was a powerful urge to do so. He looked down, and watched his cock head flare and leak another glob of clear fluid.

"Shit," Matt breathed, "Jackson, baby, f-fuck… you're gonna make me… fuck…" His groan became a deep growl that Jackson could feel vibrating in his teacher's chest. He could almost feel it in his own, and Matt's cock felt like it swelled a bit more inside him and when he slammed his hips back he felt it.

Matt came inside him, his body tensing and flinching as his cock spasmed inside Jackson's body. Jackson imagined he could feel the hot seed coursing up and into him, and swerved his hips to stir his teacher's come with his own cock, and that pressure he'd felt reached a critical mass and finally burst.

"Fuck me," he wailed, "hard, baby!"

Matt did as Jackson wanted, hammering into him the last throes of his own orgasm as he hurled Jackson over the edge.

Jackson's hole clenched, fairly vibrating as his prick began to dribble a steady stream of come, and the orgasm that came with it didn't strike him the way others had before so much as rise up and swallow him whole, creeping up his spine and over his brain while he prayed Matt's name and cussed and reached behind him to pull at his teacher's hips to urge him on, to keep going. It didn't taper off the way it should have, didn't vanish into smoke like orgasms were supposed to; it lingered, rising and falling like a new tide that just kept going in an endless cycle.

He didn't know how long it lasted; he didn't know his own name and wasn't sure he was still in his body. Matt slowed, though, until his thrusts became long, slow torments, still hard, and even occasionally still spasming. As Jackson's senses gradually returned, he realized they were covered in sweat. More, there was a wide, wide spot on the bed, his come pooled and liquefying there.

"You're gonna need to get this comforter cleaned," Jackson said, languid and nearly asleep. He wanted Matt to stay inside him forever. "I don't know how you'll manage it though. I'm not leaving this spot and neither are you. Ever. We're gonna die here probably."

Matt chuckled into Jackson's neck, and kissed him, and thrust all the way in and then stayed, scooting forward to spoon Jackson more tightly and keep them locked together. "It's not a bad way to go," he said.

"No," Jackson agreed, "not a bad way at all."

He didn't remember falling asleep, so he didn't know how long he dozed. When Jackson woke, though, he was acutely aware of the new void where Matt's cock had filled him before. He moved, a little, against Matt's warm body and realized it was still there—it had just gone soft. It slipped out easily and he clenched with the instinct that what was left behind would come out if he didn't hold onto it.

It was a strange, private thought that he would never have shared, but he imagined he could keep Matt's seed inside him until the strange weakness of his hole subsided. He liked having it inside him.

Just physical. Just to get it out of the way. Right. That hadn't been a fuck. He knew that. Matt had made love to him, and him to

Matt.

Matt stirred, and Jackson kissed his sleepy eyelids.

"What time is it?" Matt wondered, groggy and still half asleep.

Jackson hunted for a clock and squinted at the one on the wall. "Almost two," he said. "I'm going to have to explain myself tomorrow. Trevor's probably losing his mind right about now."

Matt's eyebrows pinched together, and he opened his mouth as if to speak but nothing immediately came out.

Jackson knew, though, what he was about to say.

"Ah… you should… I mean, probably everyone in sight is asleep right now. So…"

"So, I should go," Jackson finished.

Of course he should. If anyone saw him leaving, freshly fucked —and he knew he must look like it—then there would be first rumors, then observations, and then dismissals and expulsions and then they'd both be screwed. Irrationally, Jackson didn't precisely care. He knew he should have, but he couldn't muster the panic that he should have felt at the thought.

"I'm sorry, Jackson," Matt said.

Jackson sat up, clenching his weak hole to keep from making a much worse mess on the nice, if stained, comforter. "No," he said. "Don't be. I get it. Careers and… shit. Just like before." He wanted to laugh, but couldn't manage it. "It's like our theme song or something. Jesus…"

Matt sat up as well, clearly pained, his cock still glistening with lube and come. It was almost comical. Made love? They'd just made a mess.

"Jackson, listen—"

"I'm fine," Jackson assured him. It was a lie, but he told it easily. "Look. I get it. What we're doing is… just as complicated and secretive as before and that's just the way it is. For now. Maybe forever, who the fuck knows?" He sighed, and rubbed his face. It didn't help anything but it gave him a moment to compose himself.

"Matt, I don't want to stop," Jackson said. "Just so it's out there. We can be as secretive and sneaky as we need to be, but… I just need this. Okay?"

Since Matt didn't immediately agree, and Jackson didn't want to risk hearing him shoot it down, Jackson swung his feet off the bed and hobbled to the bathroom on weak legs. "I need to shower before I go," he said.

When he emerged—looking hopefully not-quite-so-freshly-fucked but still pretty sure Trevor would guess—Matt was back in his briefs, laying on his back and staring at the ceiling.

"So?" Jackson asked. "Just… let me have this. Please?"

“You deserve more,” Matt said.

“Yeah, I do,” Jackson agreed. “But I’ll… settle for this because it’s you.”

Matt only sighed, and stared at Jackson for a long moment before he smiled, and waved Jackson over.

They kissed a bit more, cuddled, and muttered to one another about how good it had all been, abandoning the danger in it with all the vigor of someone ignoring their cancer diagnosis through sheer, willful delusion.

Jackson did leave, eventually, though. There were no final kisses at the door—those were performed in the living room, where it was safe—and Jackson’s footsteps were quiet, his passage dark without the aid of the porch light. He almost tripped over the sidewalk.

Despite it all, though, he smiled most of the way home. He’d won. Mostly. What’s more, Trevor was asleep when he got back, so Jackson thanked whatever divine powers were smiling on him this night and went to bed to get the few hours of sleep he could before he faced whatever truth was waiting for him in the morning light.

Assuming he couldn’t just continue to avoid it, which was the plan. Not a good plan, admittedly. But a plan he was more than willing to follow through on.

Chapter 12

The feeling of being caught inside the clenching, narrow tunnel of Jackson's ass stuck with Matt through the night. He didn't sleep so much as revisit that feeling, drift into a dream of it, and come out of it hard again and aching to have Jackson there with him.

When morning came, to say that he was wrecked was true on so many levels that he had a passing urge to write Webster's with his thoughts on the word.

That day, and the next several after it, were a mix of panic, terror, excitement, and shame. Jackson didn't come over to his place again—there was no opportunity for it, both of them were drowning in work. They'd effectively blown off grading papers on the one night that Jackson could have lightened the load which meant that Matt spent his nights doing it himself. Jackson for his part had mid-terms coming and papers of his own to write for classes he needed to pass.

However, Matt had underestimated Jackson's creativity. A kind of code developed between them, a series of seemingly work related references about lesson planning, lecturing, paper writing, and study guides.

Jackson showed up during office hours once, and without a word locked the door and knelt between Matt's knees to blow him behind the desk, his eager mouth draining Matt so profoundly that he couldn't focus during his evening class.

Another day, Jackson caught Matt's eye in the hallway after texting him a question about a book that wasn't on the syllabus—the Persian Boy, about Alexander and Bagoas—and discreetly slipped into a bathroom. Against his better judgment, Matt took a winding route to the door and once inside discovered that Jackson had already lubed himself up and was ready to be fucked again. He had to cover Jackson's mouth with his hand to keep him from making noise.

The danger of it was something Jackson liked. He always had. As much as Matt tried to discourage him, though, when it came down to it he caved every time. All Jackson had to do was smile, sway his hips, bite his lip, or glance at Matt's crotch, and it was like an invisible leash reached out and collared him by the balls to drag him off to wherever Jackson had decided it would happen.

He was like a drug. Not just Jackson's insatiable mouth or the way his tight hole seemed to be able to drive Matt to brinks of pleasure he'd never imagined—what was it about that ass of his? Once, Matt had barely been inside him thirty seconds before he came, bewildered and dazed, and stamina had never been an issue before. No, it was Jackson himself. Even their discussions about class and the preparation for the week Jackson was supposed to teach, or at least

provide the material for, became charged with innuendo.

Arguments over what poems were the most critical representations of the Imagist movement became foreplay that ended with aggressive, almost punitive hand jobs, as though one of them could win the argument by forcing the other to come first. A debate over whether to make students recite passages in front of the class as a means of interpreting them got them both so heated that in the middle of it Matt bent Jackson over his desk and fingered him and fucked him, Jackson's arms pinned at the small of his back, until he begged to come and Matt only acquiesced when the boy agreed to drop his side of it.

Sex and intellect become so thoroughly entwined that Matt found himself getting hard behind the podium during a lecture because the last time he'd been going over those notes Jackson had distracted him with a blowjob that had lasted almost an hour when Jackson refused to finish it until Matt could recite the key points of the lecture from memory 'under duress'.

And every time it happened, he told himself this was the last time. This time, he would break the news. He would put a stop to it for both their sakes. He built his resolve one brick at a time until Jackson showed up and smashed through it. It got to the point where Matt saw suspicion from every eye—even visiting juniors and seniors from High Schools who couldn't possibly have known.

Which was why Matt's first thought upon getting an email from Deanna about an urgent meeting was that they had been caught. She was summoning him to discreetly request his resignation. Realistically that's how it would happen, of course—as long as no one was filing charges there was no reason to let a scandal get out of hand.

He showed up to her office sweating, and had to tell her he'd had too much coffee after a late night grading papers. Whether Deanna believed it—or anything anyone said; she always had roughly the same expression on her face—Matt couldn't judge. So he simply sat, and waited for the shoe to drop.

"I have… mixed news," she said.

Well, then it probably wasn't what he'd feared. That wouldn't have been mixed at all.

"I'm all ears," Matt said.

"I've gotten the department to agree to tenure you," Deanna said simply. She didn't seem excited; it sounded like a warning.

Matt's excitement was… muted. "That sounds… good?"

"We have had some concerns voiced by some of the students in your classes," Deanna went on. "Now, according to your records they're mostly passing, so I don't think it's arising because you're being too hard on them, but I've had complaints leveled against me

before so I am sensitive to the attitudes that students under this kind of stress can have when it comes to their instructors."

"I see," Matt said. He didn't, but it seemed like the best response.

"Some of them seem to think that you've been distracted lately," she said. She spread her hands. "Have you been?"

Denying it would have put up red flags. People who didn't know they had problems were inherently unreliable. He came up with a plausible reason on the fly. "I have been," he admitted, and slumped a bit. That didn't need to be faked. He was exhausted in so many ways it didn't warrant differentiating them; they all just blended together. "I've been going through some personal issues. They're resolved; but it's taken some time to recover from it. Family issues. Some old history that's been dredged up, and now it seems like more and more just keeps popping up where I least expect it. I didn't realize the impact on my classes was so obvious, I've been doing my best to keep it all ordered and separate."

Deanna didn't look sympathetic. She looked concerned over her choice to lobby for him. "But it's resolved now?"

"Yes," Matt said. It certainly would be, soon. He had to gather the willpower to set Jackson straight, and he would. Somehow. "I would very much like to accept an offer of tenure, Professor Mason. I'll compartmentalize, stress manage, and focus. I'm grateful you brought this to my attention. It helps me prioritize."

Deanna gave him a long, steady look, and then finally gave him a single nod. "See that you do. The board won't approve tenure unless your classes are judged to have been exceedingly successful after this. I intercepted some of the complaints, Matthew, but they are aware of a few of them and it's the only thing giving them pause.

"I don't have to tell you what an opportunity this is," she said. She leaned forward and put her elbows on the desk, hands clasped. "Not just the long term career, but the paycheck. They've approved a hundred and fifty-thousand-dollar salary your first three years. Don't mess this up."

It nearly rocked Matt back in his chair. That kind of money… his first thought, the very first reaction, was that it was the sort of money that could make a life for him and Jackson, long term; the kind where Jackson could focus entirely on school.

The very next thought, was that Jackson was, of course, planning on going to Oxford. Where there had been pride in that before, now there was the taint of… what was it, bitterness?

"Matthew?" Deanna asked.

Matt blinked. "Sorry, I… was in shock. Did you say a hundred and fifty thousand?"

"I did," Deanna said. "If, and only if, the board is impressed with the outcome of your classes. Impress them. Impress me. Okay?"

"Absolutely," Matt said. "I will impress all of you, and so will my students."

"Excellent," Deanna said. "Go do that."

Matt shook the department head's hand, and then left in a mix of elation and dismay.

It was what he wanted. What he needed; it was the end goal for any Ph.D. who went back to teach, and just about the best thing you could hope for with a Ph.D. in literature, which was next to useless except to help other people get their degrees in the same field.

He chanted that to himself over and over again, fortifying his new wall of resolve with stronger stuff. He had to take this opportunity, and Jackson had to take his. That was the way it had to be, and it was up to him to make it so. Jackson certainly wouldn't.

All the resolve in the world wouldn't settle his stomach, though. He had to break Jackson's heart again. At least this time, it hadn't taken quite so long. Somehow, though, he didn't think that would make it better.

Chapter 13

It was easy to be lost in the sheer joy that Jackson felt. Sure, he was having to scramble to get some of his work done, and Trevor was now launching daily inquisitions of his activities and whereabouts—he'd been doing it since the day after Jackson slept with Matt—but rather than pillars of stress that stood on a foundation of, well, more stress, they now stood upon a single constant that he couldn't keep from feeling was there to stay.

Everything that was needed in a real relationship was there between him and Matt. They had chemistry—emotional, physical, intellectual, the holy trifecta—their interests were aligned and complimentary but not competing, and they were virtually the same trajectory. Granted, Jackson was bound for Oxford and Matt was being offered, tentatively, tenure here at Rose State but… well, logistics versus love?

Love. Jackson paused in the shower, where he'd been cleaning himself between classes after having seduced Matt in the bathroom for the second time. It was a serious thought, with serious implications and consequences. And it was hard for him to figure out the depth of it.

Once, those six years ago, he'd thought that he was in love with Matt. And maybe he was. It was hard to really know because, as Trevor was never slow to tell him, you never actually remembered emotional things with any degree of absolute clarity. The good got polished, the bad rusted, and there was very little that remained between the two.

Until the end of the term, when they could freely engage in whatever the hell they wanted to, it didn't warrant dwelling on. Let it be what it was. Still, the thought lingered.

When he left the shower, he returned to his room wrapped in his towel and already planning the next 'attack'. With a smirk, he picked up his phone to text Matt something dirty—coded, but clear—and saw that he'd missed a call from a number he didn't recognize, and that there was a voice mail left.

"Mr. Greene, I'm calling from Carlton General Medical Center. You are listed as Eunice Greene's next of kin." Jackson's chest felt like it collapsed in on itself, and he had to play the voice mail again. "Eunice was admitted this morning after an ambulance was called to her residence. She has suffered an acute myocardial infarction—a heart attack—and her scheduled surgery was moved up. She is currently recovering, however, there have been complications. It is best that you call us back as soon as possible." Jackson had to listen a third time to get the number, and when he had it he stared at nothing

for a long time, sinking into the hollowness that had opened up in him.

When the numbness passed, he was shaking. He dressed, strangely aware of how silent the room seemed, and the world outside it. Shouldn't there have been ambient noise? Was it normally this quiet? It was hard not to feel like the spectre of death was there, stilling the world for no other reason than to make Jackson take it seriously.

He did take it seriously. As soon as he was dressed, he checked his accounts and looked for plane tickets. He didn't have a car, and even if he did the drive would take too long—nearly a full day. The bus turned out to be the only option he could reasonably afford, but the next bus that came anywhere near Carlton didn't leave until tomorrow afternoon. He wouldn't get there until almost a day later.

He bought the ticket, and then tried to force himself to work on a paper that was due on Friday. The words wouldn't come. He tried reading one of his other complete papers out loud, but his voice was brittle. Research might have helped, but he couldn't keep the information in his mind. He was in a kind of helpless trance, he realized, withdrawn far away from the pain that he knew he was going to feel—which was almost worse than feeling it in the moment.

Gran was going to die. He knew it. If he called the hospital back, that's what they were going to tell him. So he put it off, and put it off, until the guilt of not checking on her outweighed the dread of hearing the pronouncement and, like checking on Schrödinger's cat, somehow sealing her fate by it.

The receptionist answered with a clipped, "Carlton General, how can I direct your call?"

"I'm… ah, I received a message about my grandmother? I'm her next of kin, she… she had a heart attack and should be in recovery after surgery?" There'd been no mention of what ward she was in. "Eunice Greene is her name."

There was typing on the other end. "One moment." How could she be so… nonplussed? Probably she commuted to Carlton from somewhere else. If she'd been local, she'd know Eunice. Why weren't locals taking care of her? Strangers wouldn't care. To them she was just—

"I see you," the next voice, this one a man, said.

Jackson was already off balance, so it took him a moment to realize he was speaking with someone in intensive care; not someone who could see him. "Uh… sorry, I'm Jackson Greene. My grandmother is Eunice Greene. I got a call."

More typing. "One… moment…"

Jackson waited.

"Ah, Mrs. Greene was moved to CCU after her surgery."

"Is she… so is there a prognosis?"

"I'm afraid I can't discuss that over the phone, sir. If you'll come in, the doctor can meet with you and—"

"Okay, I'm going to do that, but I can't get there until tomorrow. So… can you just tell me anything at all?"

The nurse, or receptionist, or whoever was actually on the other end sighed impatiently. "I'm very sorry sir, but that would be illegal. Until we can verify your identity—"

"I could fax you my license?"

"No, sir. Come as soon as you can, and we can release the authorized details. I'm sorry, but that's the only option."

The phone creaked in Jackson's hand, and he realized he was trying to crush it. Luckily, his hands weren't that strong. "I… fine."

"We'll contact you in the event of any serious changes," the man said.

"Like if she dies?" Jackson snapped.

A pause. "Yes, sir. I am sorry. I don't make the rules."

Jackson blew out a hot breath and closed his eyes. "Right. I know you don't. I apologize. Thank you for… just… thanks."

He hung up. Well, she was still alive, then.

Reality coalesced by degrees. It was getting dark outside. He'd missed his evening class. And not even finished his paper for it.

He groaned, and tried to summon up tears. Catharsis. Something to relieve the pressure. Nothing came, though. It was just that numbness, except now it was accosted by the dull, distant roar of the world beyond his bedroom window.

Jackson looked at his phone for a moment, weighed choices in his head, and then called Matt.

"Jackson?" Matt answered. Jackson had never called him directly. He sounded unsure whether to be alarmed or irritated. They'd just seen each other hours before, under very different circumstances.

"Matt?" Jackson said, the name becoming a question when, hearing the man's voice, the dam inside cracked enough to let out some of the water. "I need you."

Matt paced his living room, glancing up approximately every thirty seconds at the clock.

When he'd broken up with Jackson, that tender, innocent young man hadn't cried. He hadn't shed a tear, even though it had absolutely torn his heart out. In fact, he'd never seen Jackson cry. He could be emotional, fiery, passionate—lately, it had been his resting state, basically—but never had he cried.

Matt still hadn't seen it, not really; but he'd heard it. Jackson was in turmoil, and Matt could make educated guesses about why, but he hadn't been willing to say on the phone. His best guess was that Eunice had died before Jackson had a chance to see her again.

His own mother had passed while he was abroad. He knew that kind of guilt, and the pain that came with it. That pain never went away. It dulled over time, but Matt still carried the guilt with him that he hadn't been there.

The knock came. He should have left the door unlocked, told Jackson to just come in so that no one heard it. He kicked himself for thinking that.

That carefully built wall, the resolve he'd managed to harden to what he thought was steel, cracked when he opened the door.

Jackson didn't speak. He rushed Matt like he might tackle him and threw his arms around his waist. And at that moment, Matt forgot to close the door and didn't even realize it. He just held his boy close and let him cry, the very core of him shaken from it and bleeding for the need to make whatever it was better.

He didn't ask, though; not right away. Jackson sobbed into his chest, shaking from it, for ages, until the spell passed. When it did, though; that was when Matt remembered to close the door. The panic at realizing anyone might have seen them, though, was entirely overwhelmed by the concern he had for Jackson. "What happened, baby?"

"Gran," Jackson said, his voice raw. "She had a heart attack. She's in CCU. They did her surgery but… there are complications. I couldn't get a bus out tonight and I couldn't afford a plane ticket at all, so I'm going tomorrow. Jesus… Matt, I can't even… I just…" He slumped, pressed his hands to his face and began to sob again.

"Shh," Matt breathed as he pulled Jackson against him.

"She's all I've ever had," Jackson sobbed. "I should never have come here. I should have stayed with her."

"Don't do that," Matt said. "Don't blame yourself. She wanted you to do this. She wanted you to have your life. Come on. Shh." He rubbed Jackson's back. "How bad is it?"

"They wouldn't tell me," Jackson said, angry now. "They fucking called me. I called back and hit a fucking bureaucratic wall. All I know is that she was moved from ICU to CCU. You know what that means?"

Matt did, but didn't say it. If ICU wasn't cutting it, it was because she needed twenty-four-hour observation and care. And at her age…

"What time is the bus leaving?"

"One thirty tomorrow," Jackson said, dejected. "It was all I

could find. I have to pack. Shit, I should have done that already." He actually made for the door.

"Wait," Matt said. "So… it'll take you until Friday almost, to get there, won't it?"

"Yeah," Jackson said. "She… I don't know. She's strong. She'll hang on. I can call her in the morning, maybe, and…" Jackson leaned against the door.

Friday. If he could be back by then for class, no one would necessarily notice he was gone. He didn't have a Thursday class even though he still had papers from last week to grade, lesson plans to make. Jackson's week was coming up and they'd gotten most of it done. If anyone noticed they were gone at the same time, though…

Matt searched for the rubble of his wall of resolve, and couldn't even find that.

"I'll take you," he said. "Tonight. We can drive through the night and… if I leave you there I can be back for the Friday class and you can use your return ticket."

In other circumstances, he would have expected Jackson to decline. When it wasn't that important. But right now Jackson just turned and hurled himself again into Matt's arms.

"Thank you," he said.

"Come on," Matt told him. "Let's go get some clothes from your place."

"I didn't come over so you could… just so you know. I just… I needed to feel you. I don't know why."

"I know, baby," Matt said. "Come on. Time's wasting."

They left his place, and Matt didn't even bother to turn the porch light off. For now, he could pretend that it didn't matter.

Chapter 14

Exhausted from the day, Jackson slept through most of the first half of the drive. He tried to stay awake. He and Matt kept the conversation as intellectual as they could, but eventually it tapered off until they were listening to quiet music on the radio, and at that point whatever energy was left in him sapped away and he slept.

When he woke, it was light outside. The light on the radio said it was almost eight, and the early winter sun was only just lighting the sky. Matt looked alert enough. He glanced at Jackson when Jackson shifted to a more comfortable position in his seat.

"Looked like you needed the sleep," Matt said. "Did it help at all?"

Jackson just shook his head.

"Hungry?" Matt asked. "Never mind. Don't answer. You need to eat. We can make a quick stop, there's a diner coming up. Road food, but…"

Jackson nodded, and tried to smile, but it didn't happen easily. "Sounds good," he said.

Matt reached across the bench seat and took Jackson's hand. For all that they'd done together now—far, far more than they'd done when Jackson was in high school—it felt strange and new. He intertwined his fingers with Matt's and for a moment, he did feel better.

The diner they stopped at was basically a truck stop, as evidenced by the number of trucks parked around it, but had a full parking lot and plenty of regular cars and trucks as well. It was in the middle of nowhere—Jackson didn't actually know what part of the state they were in, or whether they'd entered Texas yet or not. Whatever the case was, the place smelled like food from the sidewalk, and it was only at that point that Jackson realized he was actually hungry.

When they got out of the car, Jackson looked around a moment, and realized there was a subtle stress gone from his shoulders that he hadn't really recognized when it first settled on him. He should have, of course.

"What?" Matt asked. "What are you smiling about?"

He was smiling. Imagine that. "I was just thinking about the time we went to the mall, before… before graduation." He waved at the parking lot. "Far away from everyone we know. It's nice not to have to worry about who might see us."

A few ticks after he said it, the memory of the night before blossomed in his mind, and he grimaced. "Shit… shit, Matt, I didn't even think about who might have seen me last night, I—"

“Don’t think about it,” Matt said. He waved a hand. “Not right now, anyway. Come on. Let’s eat.”

It wasn’t the best, safest place to do so—at least, that was Jackson’s face-value judgment of the place—but when Matt walked toward him, he took Jackson’s hand in his. Whatever his worry about who would give them grief, for the moment he wouldn’t have let go for all the world.

There was another stop for lunch, and with food in him at regular intervals Jackson’s energy crept up a bit at a time until he was feeling stable. Whenever he thought about where they were going, remembering that it was to very likely see Gran for the last time, his chest did tighten. But having Matt with him helped, and for short moments he could escape the impending loss by entertaining fantasies. He imagined they were driving across country—to somewhere other than Texas—to their new home. A place with no complications, no social or ethical rules to worry about, where they could just be together.

He nearly shared that with Matt. He nearly told him how he felt. Maybe it didn’t need to be said, though, or maybe he still wasn’t certain about it. Either way, he kept it to himself. Now wasn’t the time for that. Maybe afterward.

They made it there by four in the afternoon, speeding well over the limit on some of the emptier stretches of highways between towns. Carlton came into view, and brought with it a wave of memories.

“You know, I left Carlton that summer after graduation,” Jackson said as they passed the welcome sign. Population three thousand fifty two. It had gone up since he was here last. “I’ve visited basically once a year since then, but never for long. Never as long as I should have.”

“Don’t,” Matt chided gently. “You’re here now.”

“Yeah,” Jackson said. “Thanks to you. Thank you, Matt. It… it means a lot. That you were there for me.”

Matt glanced at him. He swallowed, and then nodded, and after some kind of struggle inside his own head he mumbled something almost incoherent.

“What?” Jackson asked.

“Sorry,” Matt said, “I’m… just tired. I said I’m glad I could be there for you. That’s all.”

Jackson left it. Whatever he’d tried to say hadn’t been that many words, but Matt was almost certainly running on fumes. Maybe he could nap at the hospital, or even get a room. Though, to get back for class on time he’d pretty much have to leave in a few hours.

They drove past Carlton High on the way to the hospital. As always, there was an irrational urge to stop and visit. What was it about high school? The place had let out just recently, but there were still cars in the lot, and a few students and faculty milling around.

"Didn't you say you saw Mr. Lawrence a while back?" Jackson asked. "She's still teaching here, isn't she?"

"She is," Matt said. He shifted a bit in his seat.

"We can be careful while we're here," Jackson said. "You're just doing some social outreach."

Matt glanced at him, brow furrowed. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Jackson sighed. "I'm used to it by now. Believe me. But I was thinking you probably shouldn't drive back right away. Maybe you could crash at her place?"

"It would make more sense to just cancel class on Friday. Give everyone the weekend to turn in their papers."

Jackson gave a rueful chuckle and tsked. "Give them an inch and they'll take a mile, Professor."

"Yeah, well… one canceled class will be fine," Matt said, but it didn't sound like he really believed that. Maybe he was just trying to keep Jackson from feeling guilty about the whole trip. There was no way around that, but Jackson didn't argue it with him.

The hospital was very old on the outside, but impressively new on the inside. It was the only hospital in about a hundred miles, so Jackson supposed keeping the place up to date was probably critical. He wasn't entirely certain what the technological value of a sleek front desk was, all stainless steel and oak and flowing curves, but maybe they got it for a bargain.

He stated his business to the receptionist—the same one who he'd spoken to the day before, but she was less of a bitch in person, he thought—and she directed them to the desk upstairs, who sent them to another desk in another wing, who forwarded them ultimately to a desk outside CCU. There, they hit a snag.

"We're here to see Eunice Greene," Jackson said as professionally and calmly as he could after their goose chase. "I'm told she's through those doors somewhere." He pointed at the key-carded doors with the little sensor boxes on the walls next to them.

"ID?" This man was a nurse, or at least an orderly, the scrubs gave it away, but not the one he'd spoken with before.

Jackson handed it over.

"And you?" The man asked of Matt.

"He's with me," Jackson said.

"I don't have to—"

"Yes," Jackson said, "you do."

"Are you related to Mrs. Greene?" The nurse/orderly asked.

Jackson answered before Matt had a chance to mess it up. He wanted Matt to meet his Gran again. He wanted Gran to meet Matt again. He wanted to tell her the truth, and when he realized that, it became the most important thing in the world in the span of a few seconds.

"This is my husband," Jackson said. "We're legally married."

The orderly/nurse looked either skeptical or simply bigoted. The odds of it were about even. "I'll still need ID," he said.

Matt handed it over, "Really, I… don't have to go in, I mean, if I need to wait—"

"Absolutely not," Jackson snapped.

The man behind the counter actually compared the IDs. "You don't have the same last name," he said dully, but there was a hint of nervousness in his voice. A crack in the bureaucratic armor.

"We didn't change our names," Jackson said, smoothly, calmly, but with what he hoped were razors in his voice, "we both have careers attached to them. My Gran, his grandmother-in-law, is in there possibly dying. She was at our wedding. If my husband does not get the chance to pay his respects to the woman who gave him the okay to ask for my hand in marriage, I will deliver the ACLU to your doorstep along with a hurricane of national media attention that you do not want right now, and I will name you personally when I arrive carrying a protest sign."

The crack became a gap, and the conflicted orderly—or nurse—seemed to weigh the possible outcomes here. All of them likely led to loss of a job.

He handed the IDs back. "There are no cell phones allowed inside," he said. "Visiting hours are until six."

It wasn't a lot of time, but it was something, and this battle wouldn't have to be fought tomorrow, hopefully, if they were here that long and Jackson could get Matt on some kind of list.

They passed through the doors, and it wasn't until they were closed behind them that Matt cleared his throat pointedly.

"I want you to meet my Gran," Jackson said. "Again."

Matt was wise enough not to comment, at least.

Jackson's phone chimed. Eyes of orderlies and nurses in the vicinity cut toward him, judgmental and warning, and he winced an apology at them and then pulled his phone out. It was Trevor, texting him to ask where the hell he was and if he was okay.

"Crap," he muttered.

"Problem?" Matt asked.

Jackson ignored the message and turned off his phone. "No. Nothing serious." He braced himself at Gran's door, and Matt laid a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s okay,” Matt said when Jackson couldn’t bring himself to enter. “I’m here.”

Another deep breath, and Jackson pushed through the door, leading Matt in after him.

She looked old. It was the first thing Jackson thought when he saw her. Realistically, she had been old more or less his entire life. But until this moment she had still been spry, and vital. She’d worked her farm until she was eighty, and even then she still picked produce and fed animals. For as long as Jackson could remember she had seemed, to him, to defy old age.

Not anymore. She was thin, her face wan and pale, her skin papery and dry. He’d seen her… well, almost a year ago, but how could she have wasted to this so quickly? He tried to remember what she’d looked like then, but all he could come up with was that general mélange of composite memories that represented ‘Gran’ over the years. She hadn’t looked like *this*, at least.

She was sleeping, and Jackson didn’t want to wake her. So he and Matt took seats in the chairs at her bedside. It was only four thirty. They had an hour and a half before anyone would throw them out and maybe not even then if the nurses didn’t check, though that seemed unlikely.

Matt sat quietly, and Jackson was grateful for it. He felt like he should say something, but at the moment Gran seemed peaceful. Restful. He didn’t want to disturb her. So the two of them simply sat, and waited.

Chapter 15

Matt should have been able to doze, but it wouldn't come. It was the hospital environment, maybe. Something about hospitals had always made him uncomfortable. The thought of Jackson's grandmother here, even though he barely knew her, seemed somehow wrong. She was old; if he recalled it right, she must be in her eighties at least. She'd grown up on and inherited a farm. It seemed like she should pass there if she was going to go.

He didn't plan to make this suggestion, though. Jackson watched her thoughtfully. Matt had expected him to cry again, maybe, or tell stories about her. It seemed like that was the thing people did in these situations, but he didn't know from personal experience. Whatever the proper etiquette was, he decided that the best thing he could do was be there, and be available, and not think about the long day he had spent before this contemplating whether or not he should go ahead with the plan to break up with Jackson after all this had passed.

It seemed cruel to do it after this. The impulse to whisk Jackson to his grandmother's side had been just that, an impulse, and he'd had nearly a thousand long, long miles to realize it. But then, that was how it had always been with Jackson. Back then, and now. Nothing had really changed.

Whether that meant something good or something… other than good, he couldn't quite decide—and it wasn't just the bone deep exhaustion that weighed on him but couldn't quite drag him under. Maybe, other than the circumstances, what they'd had six years ago was already as real and as good as it was supposed to be. It seemed like they had picked it right back up, circumstances and all, where it left off.

He ruminated on that while he watched Jackson, sometimes directly and sometimes obliquely. Eventually, Jackson leaned over his grandmother's bed and laid his head on his arms. Soon enough, he was pretty sure Jackson had dozed off.

So, Matt kept the vigil himself. The minutes ticked by, but slowly. Weariness made the time seep past like cool honey, and he found himself entranced by the gradual arc of the second hand in its apparently long journey around the hours.

"Is that… was it Mr. Smith?" Eunice's frail voice asked.

It startled Matt out of his trance. God, it was almost a quarter to six. He'd fallen asleep with his eyes open, he thought.

"Yes," he told her as he turned. He whispered, even though Jackson almost certainly wanted to be woken up. "I brought Jackson, Mrs. Greene."

“Oh,” she looked around to find him and then saw him there, and smiled. “Oh. Look at him. Hasn’t changed a bit since he was three. That’s when I took him in, you know. You…” she looked back at Matt in some confusion, “…you were his teacher. In school. Is that right?”

Matt nodded. “Turns out I still am. Kind of. I teach at his college now.”

“Is that so?” she wondered. “Well. And… you brought him all the way here?”

“It seemed like he needed to be here,” Matt said. “So. Yes.” He looked at Jackson, still sleeping, undisturbed by the quiet chatter. But it would be time to leave soon. He started to reach out to touch Jackson’s shoulder.

Eunice, however, stalled him. “It’s alright,” she said. “Let him sleep a bit. I don’t think I’ve seen him like this in… oh, close to twenty years? I can barely recall. When he first came to live with me, he could hardly sleep a wink. I had to stay with him in his room until he fell asleep and the moment I moved…” she laughed weakly. “I had to do that until he was seven or eight. Every night.”

Again, Eunice’s expression pinched into confusion. She peered at Matt. “And you’re… oh, forgive me. You’re his teacher, you said?”

“Yes, Mrs. Greene.” She seemed either unconvinced, or suspicious. Sharp as she seemed, at least with her long term memory… it seemed likely she was still fairly sedated. Or, maybe her mind was finally going. Matt simply tried to be as polite as he could. “He really wanted to see you before… ah…”

“I’m going,” Eunice said, matter of factly. “Funny. I can sort of feel it… I always did wonder.” She gazed at Jackson for a long moment, and then looked back at Matt. “Is he happy? You must know, if you went to all this trouble for him.”

His instinct of course was to tell her that yes, her grandson was happy. She could pass knowing it was so. “I think so,” Matt said, instead. “I hope so.”

Eunice’s expression softened, and she smiled a little. “You’re his teacher. Is that precisely right?”

Ah. Matt hesitated before answering the same way. No, her mind wasn’t going. She just didn’t believe him. He felt his cheeks grow hot. “He… well… we’re…”

Eunice reached over the railing and gently patted his hand. “I came to terms with the many ways in which Jackson is special some years ago,” she said. “I understand. I also know how these things go. I won’t make my last request something as unrealistic as asking you to make him happy. But, you do your best, and that will be good enough for me. How’s that?”

Matt had never known Jackson’s parents. He knew that they’d

been unable to raise him due to addiction issues. But he knew Jackson very well, and now he thought he understood where he got his cleverness from. “I’ll do what I can,” he said, before glancing at the clock. “We have to leave at six. We should probably wake him up.”

Eunice did. She reached down and stroked his hair away from his forehead. “Hello, pumpkin loaf.”

Jackson practically sprang up, but in slow motion, waking up as he came. He laughed, when he was fully conscious. “*Pumpkin loaf*,” he groaned. He glanced at Matt, possibly a little irritated, and then looked at the clock. “Hi, Gran. You met Matt?”

“Matt,” Gran repeated. “That’s right. I could only remember Mr. Smith. So, you two, huh?”

Jackson’s eyes widened and he checked in with Matt; Matt gave him a shrug and a nod.

“Uh, yeah, Gran.”

“Well, he seems like a fine young man,” she said. “I’m sorry we’ve only just met. I always liked him.” She winked at Matt.

Jackson laughed, but it choked off as his eyes grew wet and he had to wipe them. “I always liked him, too. Are you… is it okay here? Are you comfortable? I didn’t see the doctor yet, I haven’t talked to anyone about…”

Eunice looked as though she knew there was bad news to deliver. There was, of course, but it was a strange thing to see. She looked almost pained, not that she was going to die—that she seemed more at peace with than Matt could imagine being—but that she was going to have to leave her grandson behind.

“It’s not looking very optimistic,” she said. When Jackson began to cry, clutching her hand in both of his, she didn’t tell him not to. She didn’t tell him not to be sad. Instead she just let him have his moment. They didn’t have more than two minutes left before six.

“Listen,” Eunice said, when Jackson seemed better poised to hear her, “I’m at peace, pumpkin loaf. It’s been a good life. I know this is going to sound awfully cliché and even a little trite, but I have to say it anyway. Grieve however you need to when I go. That’s what you do. But then, be happy. That’s all I want from you.”

When Jackson glanced up at Matt again, Matt’s chest tightened.

“I will, Gran. Or, I’ll try, anyway.”

Six came. The minute hand swung past twelve, and every second after was borrowed. Matt listened for footsteps, though he supposed hearing them wouldn’t make a difference.

“Happiness is a choice,” Gran said. “Just remember that for me. Okay? You make it every morning.” She smiled at him, and tugged a thumb toward Matt. “True love is a choice, too. You can’t

help who you fall in love with, and you might fall in and out of love with plenty of people in a long life. I certainly have. But true love is the choice you make to weather the storm with one person. Or," she chuckled, "whatever the kids are doing these days. As many as you want, I guess."

Jackson looked scandalized, and laughed with her. "Yeah. Okay. I hear you, Gran."

For a moment, Eunice's eyes drifted closed. She gave a small shudder, as though she'd nodded off at the wheel, and blinked the drowsiness away. "So tired," she said. "I'm sorry. I hope I didn't nod off for long."

"It's okay, Gran," Jackson said. "You can uh… you just rest, okay?" He swallowed hard, and sniffled, but smiled, and leaned over to kiss her forehead. "Just get plenty of rest."

Eunice pulled Jackson's hand to her lips and kissed his fingers. "I love you, Jackson. You'll always be my… my… pumpkin loaf." Her eyes were drooping again, and she held on to Jackson's hand as she drifted back to sleep.

Jackson held on to her hand until the nurse quietly opened the door and looked in. When she saw Matt and Jackson there, she glanced at the clock. "Visiting hours are—" she started.

Matt stepped toward her, whispering. "She's his only family," he said. "Just look the other way, this time?"

Probably she heard it all the time. She didn't look sold on the idea. But she looked past him to Eunice, and then up at him, and entered the room. "I need to check her vitals. You can stay a little while longer."

"Thank you," Matt said.

She did what she needed to do, and then left with a final warning glance at the clock.

Jackson sat, Eunice's hand in his, and Matt took his seat again. They would wait. However long they needed to, he decided. Nurse be damned. Even if he had to barricade the door.

As it turned out, though, they didn't have to wait long.

Chapter 16

There were no funeral arrangements to make. Gran's will was specific; she wished to be cremated and her ashes spread on the farm. There was paperwork to fill out, but thankfully Matt was there to help Jackson with it. Not because he needed help understanding the forms, but because he was numb again and stared at the first form for almost five minutes before he filled the first box.

Jackson was irrationally angry at the paperwork, as well. This wasn't supposed to be the end of a person's life. Boxes and check marks. There should have been something more solemn about it all,

but there wasn't. Gran had been his only family; his only real family, at least. But to the people that worked at the hospital, she was just another body. Their condolences felt like the formalities they probably were.

They had a place to stay. Jackson didn't know why he hadn't thought of it originally. Somehow he just imagined that Gran would go home. Walking into the empty house that night was pleasantly painful after the numbness at the hospital.

Matt didn't talk much. Neither did Jackson. Not until they were in Gran's living room. Jackson was curled up in the great recliner that seemed smaller than he remembered but still had enough cushioning and depth that he could draw his knees up and sink into it. Matt sat on the ancient flower-printed sofa, obviously struggling to stay awake.

"I'm too tired to sleep," Jackson said. "You should lay down, if you want."

"I'll be okay," Matt said. "Unless you want to be alone."

"I don't," Jackson said. "I know it's selfish, though. You've been up for what… almost twenty-four hours now, isn't it?"

"Twenty-five," Matt said, smiling. "I think."

"I won't be hurt if you need to sleep," Jackson said. He meant it, but he did want Matt to stay up with him. Or to convince him to come to bed, except… what Jackson really wanted was to have sex. And somehow that seemed wrong, made him feel ashamed. There should be some period of abstinence, or some kind of retreat from anything really enjoyable for a while. That was grieving, right?

"What did it mean," Matt asked, "when she called you Pumpkin Loaf? What was that about?"

Jackson laughed softly, and tried not to break down again. "Um… when I was little, I think maybe… eight or nine," he said, unsure about the time line, "I had a blanket. Security blanket. I'd had it forever. It was this hideous shade of orange. I think it's still around here somewhere.

"Anyway, I would roll up in it, burrito style, but it was orange and burritos weren't orange. Gran made a joke about it and I insisted that I couldn't be a burrito and… I don't know, for some reason I decided that instead of a burrito I was a pumpkin. She tried to explain that pumpkins were a different shape, and we ultimately compromised on a pumpkin loaf.

"It was really funny to her, I guess, so it just stuck for a while." He smiled for a moment, remembering how she'd laughed. It was a strangely clear memory. Not the event, exactly—just what she sounded like. "She hasn't called me that since I was about nine or ten, though. I got tired of it. I ah… I got really angry one day, for some

reason. I guess I thought I was getting too old be called by a little kid kind of name, so… she apologized and said she wouldn't do it again."

Jackson squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed them. "At the time it kind of felt like I'd won some kind of grown up argument. Establishing my identity, or something like that. Now… god, I can't believe it took me fourteen years to feel bad about having yelled at her. I felt justified at the time…"

The yawn hit him without warning, and was so long and deep, his mouth so wide, that his jaw popped. Then, the exhaustion began to sweep him away. Matt looked like he was already about to fall off.

"Come on," Jackson said, standing. He reached out and took Matt's heavy hand. "Let's get some sleep. Long drive tomorrow."

Gran's will was specific about the sale of the farm. Wendel, her longest working farm hand and more or less the manager of the place already, had right of first refusal, and he didn't refuse. Jackson would have liked to have stayed longer, but he would have to wait until the winter break to come back and sort everything out. Wendel didn't mind waiting. There wasn't much farming to do during the winter.

The drive back up seemed somehow shorter than the drive down, even though it took longer. Matt had emailed his Friday classes with the possibly good news that they had a reprieve from their deadlines. Knowing them, however, they didn't need it. The net result was that by the time Jackson and Matt go back to campus, they had a weekend in front of them with no papers to grade, and time to themselves.

Now that they were farther away from Texas, Jackson felt less guilty about wanting to drown his pain in intimacy with Matt. More than that, he had spent the drive back realizing that he had things he wanted to say, finally, and that he felt safe saying. There were possible complications ahead of them, sure. Hopefully they were minimal, best-case-scenario complications, but it didn't matter to Jackson.

It was dark when they arrived, so once the headlights were off and the cabin of the truck was dark, there was no one to see them there.

Matt didn't immediately move to leave the truck, so neither did Jackson. The air between them was palpably taut with words that hadn't been spoken yet but wanted to be. There was nothing more connecting than a road trip and a dying relative, was there? They were feeling the same things, Jackson thought. They had to be. But, as always, Matt was too restrained to say them. So, Jackson would.

"Matt," he said, turning to face him, "listen I… I can't really ever thank you enough for doing this for me. If you hadn't, I would

have… well, it would have hurt a lot more, not being able to say good bye."

"I'm glad you got to," Matt said. "That's what was important."

"There was more to it, too," Jackson said. "I wanted you to meet Gran because I wanted her to meet the man that I—"

"Jackson, we can't keep doing this," Matt said quietly.

The world seemed to open up under Jackson and suck him down into it. His stomach tumbled exactly as though he were in free fall. He had to brace himself on the door. "Jesus… fuck," he breathed. "Again? Fucking *again*? Matt… please, baby, just—"

"We…" Matt swallowed, shook his head, cleared his throat. He didn't want to say it. So why was he? "Pretty soon, you're going to go off to Oxford. I don't doubt it, and I have it on pretty damn good authority. And they want me to stay here. I just want you to have the life you're supposed to have. And if we keep doing this, then we're jeopardizing both our futures. I know this… I know it sucks. I know it isn't the right time, that it's possibly the worst time, but I think that it's the only time, too."

"I love you, Matt," Jackson breathed, his voice buried under the rocks that scratched the inside of his throat. "I love you. I know you love me, too. Don't do this. We can… we can just lay off for a while until I graduate and—"

"And then you go overseas?" Matt asked.

"I could stay here," Jackson said. He would have, too. Oxford sounded nice, but when he held the two things up next to one another it was hard to say there was a real comparison to be made.

"No," Matt said softly. "No, Jackson, you can't. If you get that chance, you have to take it. You have to. It's what your Gran would want, it's—"

"Don't use my fucking dead grandmother against me you fucking…" the steam left him almost as soon as it boiled up. "Uh… fuck. Thanks for the ride. Professor Smith."

"Jackson," Matt said as Jackson opened the door and slipped out of the cabin to leave.

But the damage was done. Jackson didn't want to hear it. He wanted to forget. That's what would be best. To just forget the whole damn thing.

Chapter 17

It was like being hollowed out with a rusty spoon. Matt watched Jackson in the rear view mirror until he was out of sight. It didn't take long in the dark. He kept on staring. He had to root himself to the seat and stay frozen as long as possible because if he didn't he would get out, and chase Jackson down, and take it all back.

A war raged in his heart and mind while he sat there in the truck. The part that didn't care about consequences and figured they could work out some other future for both of them, versus the part that didn't want to spoil it all and rob them both of anything meaningful. He couldn't take Jackson's dream away from him. And if he didn't do this now, that's what would happen. Someone would find out, and they would both be cast out of Rose State and tainted forever. All because Matt couldn't say no, couldn't keep it in his pants.

If he really loved Jackson, that was the right thing to do.

Right?

Suddenly, he didn't know. When he thought it was safe, though, he got out of the truck, and walked to his townhouse. The one generously provided by Rose State that would have made a perfect place for a couple. It was obviously built with a family in mind. Three bedrooms, even.

That family wasn't going to be Jackson. Facing that reality tore Matt apart, and he tried to regret the last two months—but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

So instead he laid down on the bed in his clothes, stared up at the ceiling, and questioned all of his decisions in life and whether they were all worth it if it meant that in the end he didn't have the man he loved.

Jackson was well and truly shut down by the time he reached his dorm room. He slipped the key into the lock, opened the door, and crept inside, praying to whoever listened on Fridays that Trevor was just gone, or balls deep in someone, or asleep or anything but waiting for Jackson.

Either there were no gods in the sky, or they all had Fridays off, however, because the moment he closed the door, Trevor came out of his room. He stared at Jackson, who had frozen in some desperate hope that in the dark, if he stood still enough, Trevor would not see him. That plan also failed. Well, he was three for three tonight.

"What the fuck, man?" Trevor asked. "Are you okay? Where have you been? I texted you, I called, I thought… I don't know what I thought. Where the hell were you?"

Maybe it was because Jackson hadn't really vented his anger at Matt—he couldn't, for some reason, not thoroughly enough to get it all out—but the sudden intrusion of Trevor's nosiness into his life triggered some flood of fury that Jackson couldn't be bothered to push back down.

"What the fuck business is it of yours?" he asked.

Trevor paused, uncertain. He'd never actually seen Jackson get angry before, not really. "I guess it isn't," he said. "But I was worried about you. Like maybe you got roofied, or hit by a car or… I don't know, anything. What the hell?"

"I didn't get roofied," Jackson said, "or hit by a car. I went home for a day. Gran died. I had shit to deal with. Good enough?"

"Jesus," Trevor breathed. He took a few steps toward Jackson. "Man, I'm… I'm sorry. I didn't know. Are you okay?"

"No, Trevor," Jackson said, "I am not okay."

"Anything I can do?"

It was hard to stay angry when Trevor shifted gears so quickly. It would have been better if he'd just kept pushing, asked more of his probing questions, or just… been nosier. This helpful, smitten version was impossible to yell at.

So Jackson sighed, his rage impotent again, and flopped onto the couch. "Not really."

"Okay," Trevor said. He took the other end of the couch, and Jackson drew his feet up to make room. After a moment, Trevor did have more questions, but by that time it was too late. Jackson's mood had shifted back to a morose kind of self-pity. "How'd you even get to Texas?"

"I got a ride," Jackson muttered.

Trevor rubbed his chin. "Yeah… was it from Professor Smith?"

Jackson groaned, and rubbed his eyes.

"That's about what I thought," Trevor said. "I went to find him when you didn't show up today. Figured you would have told the guy you're TAing for what was up since, you know, you could lose the position over it. But, he'd canceled class. I can add."

"It's not what you think," Jackson sighed.

"It *is* what I think," Trevor laughed, not entirely without mirth but not entirely out of humor either. "I'm not an idiot, Jackson. I take it your road trip didn't go that well."

"No, Trevor," Jackson said flatly, "it didn't. My grandmother died." After a moment, though, he sat up. If nothing else, Trevor was his friend. He deserved his confidence, and Jackson desperately wanted someone else to know what he was going through. "And… he broke it off with me."

"After your Gran died?" Trevor asked, wincing. "Jesus. Sorry.

Also… you were banging Professor Smith?"

Jackson shrugged. "He was banging me, more like, but yeah."

Trevor processed that a moment, looked away long enough to show that he'd gotten it and tucked it away, probably, for later, and then he clapped Jackson on the knee. "That all sucks. A lot. Want a beer?"

Jackson laughed. It felt good. Trevor was nothing if not reliable, even if he was a man whore. "Sure. Why not?"

They lounged, and drank the six pack that Trevor had gotten for the purpose of wooing some undergrad frat boy, and when Jackson was pressed for details he gave them. He told Trevor about the road trip, and about the relationship. He told him about losing his semi-virginity, as well.

When he did, Trevor nearly spit out his beer. He had to struggle to swallow it. "Holy shit, wait…" he held up a hand, and shook his head slowly, "…so all this time you… you'd never taken it up the ass?"

"No," Jackson sighed, too tired to laugh, "I hadn't. Never found the right guy."

"I miss all the best parties," Trevor muttered, and finished his beer. "So, what now?"

Jackson shrugged. He still had most of his third bottle left and it didn't look appealing, so he handed it to Trevor who never turned down a beer. "No clue. Finish school, go to Oxford… profit?"

"You know what you need," Trevor said casually, waving his prize at Jackson. "You need a rebound. Quick, dirty, entirely physical. Just, you know, mindless animal sex."

Jackson groaned, smiling, and nudged Trevor with his foot. "Somehow I knew that was going to be your solution. I wonder why?"

Trevor caught his foot, and pulled it onto his lap. He didn't rub it this time, though; just rested his hand on Jackson's ankle. "Say what you want. It works."

"And I'm sure I could find someone willing to throw me a pity fuck, right?" He kicked Trevor playfully again. The man had one tool, so every problem was a nail.

But Trevor didn't chuckle, or respond right away. He leaned over Jackson's leg and set down his bottle on the coffee table. Then, with surprising smoothness and agility that Jackson realized was probably long practice, he maneuvered Jackson's leg around him and slipped up between his legs. In the space of a few tense heartbeats he had Jackson's legs wrapped around his waist and was inches from his face.

"Trevor, come on," Jackson muttered. He could smell the beer on his friend's breath.

“Just give me a chance,” Trevor said quietly. His face dipped, his lips brushed Jackson’s.

Jackson could feel Trevor’s erection through his gym pants, pressing against him. Experimentally, he lifted his head and kissed him. He’d expected it to be wet, and nearly rabid. For some reason that’s how he’d always imagined Trevor would be in bed. Instead it was sweet. Trevor’s lips were soft, and tender, and he gently forced Jackson’s head back down to the padded arm of the couch, his tongue making tentative forays over the threshold into Jackson’s mouth.

On purely technical grounds, it should have lit Jackson’s fire. And he did want the distraction; maybe Trevor, who seemed immune to heartbreak, did know better. Jackson wanted him to be right.

But he felt nothing. Just the kiss, isolated, reaching no further than his lips and the tip of his tongue. Nothing else in him stirred in response.

It didn’t take Trevor long to realize it was the case, and when he did he retreated, and returned to his seat on the couch. He even pulled Jackson’s foot back onto his lap and picked his beer back up.

“I’m sorry, Trev,” Jackson said.

Trevor shrugged one shoulder. “Nah. It’s… don’t worry about it. Figured it was worth a shot.”

“I guess it was.” Jackson closed his eyes, and tried to feel anything. It probably wasn’t Trevor at all. Maybe tomorrow, they could try again and it would be different. A series of such attempts played out in Jackson’s imagination and he snorted at the comedy of it. It played out like a pornographic Benny Hill sketch.

“So, tell me more about your Gran,” Trevor said. “Was she from Texas?”

And just like that, it had passed.

The subject change was welcomed, and Jackson sat up a bit. “Yeah,” he said. “Born and raised.”

Really, it was the best thing Trevor could have given him. It was exactly what he needed.

Chapter 18

Jackson wasn't in class on Monday. Matt hadn't talked to him at all since they got back from Texas. Not that he had expected to, but the silence was gnawing at him.

For that matter, so was his decision. But he couldn't very well take it back now, could he? Jackson probably needed some time to recover. He was a strong kid—and also, Matt reminded himself, not a 'kid' anymore—and he would work it all out.

That didn't keep him from missing Jackson terribly. Throughout the course of the class, he turned every so often when he would have asked for Jackson's input. The students noticed. In fact, a few of them looked somewhat awkwardly uncomfortable, or in some cases scandalously amused. He caught a few whispers that he couldn't make out. It was unusual; this class was normally fairly attentive.

He collected their papers when they were dismissed, and texted Jackson against his better judgment. "Missed class. TA still important for you. Won't report it."

No text was returned.

It wasn't until he got to his office and checked his email that he realized why Jackson had missed class. Jackson had withdrawn from the TA program. Deanna didn't seem to think it would hurt his chances of getting into Oxford, as long as Matt was willing to write him a sterling recommendation.

So that was it, then. If Jackson wasn't going to stick around, make things difficult, and argue his case any way he could—and Matt wasn't certain that he could win that fight if Jackson pressed his buttons—then he really was done.

It was over. Again.

He got to work writing his recommendation. It was the least he could do.

It was hell getting through the rest of the term. Whenever he could, Matt checked in on Jackson obliquely, through Deanna, under the guise of wanting to be certain that his recommendation was made in good faith. She bore these inquires with patience at first, and then later with some irritation, so Matt had to rely on other means.

One of those presented itself to him, and nearly gave him a heart attack when it did. Jackson's roommate, Trevor, showed up during office hours.

Jackson had mentioned his roommate a few times, but he hadn't really done the guy justice. Trevor was model-gorgeous, with the sort of body only a college athlete with nothing but time to keep it in shape could manage. It was hard for Matt to decide if he was

jealous or attracted. Probably both. And he probably wasn't alone in that.

"Professor Smith, right?" Trevor said.

"That's me," Matt told him. He knew who Trevor was, he'd seen a picture—albeit not a very good one, apparently—but there was no telling what Trevor knew. "How can I help you?"

Trevor carefully closed the door behind him, and took the chair on the other side of Matt's desk. He held his breath for a moment before he spoke. "I'm here about Jackson. I'm Trevor Tully, Jackson is my roommate and… pretty much by best friend."

"Jackson Greene," Matt said, "my TA. Or, he was, anyway. How is he doing?"

"I think you can probably guess, Matt."

Matt would have expected to get a thrill of nervousness. Maybe Trevor was here to blackmail him or something. But relief was what came. "I haven't spoken to him in weeks," Matt said. "I've been worried."

"He's been working non-stop," Trevor said. "Barely sleeping. He says he's fine, but he's not. Jackson's always been kind of a workaholic, but it's different right now, and he looks awful. If he keeps going like this he's going to self-destruct."

"It's good that he's got a friend like you," Matt offered. What else could he say? Not what he wanted to.

Trevor shook his head. "I'm guessing that what happened between you two has to do with the whole 'teachers fucking students is wrong' thing." He put the major violation of ethics in air quotes.

"That was… a part of it, yes," Matt said.

"Jackson wasn't just fucking you," Trevor said. "He was in love. I think he has been since you two messed around when he was in high school."

Now Matt did get nervous. Christ, how much had Jackson told this guy? "That… ah…"

Trevor waved a hand. "Dude, I'm over it. He told me the story. Believe me, if Jackson came after me like that I'd cave, too. I wish he would, honestly."

"Oh," Matt said, curbing the bitter tang of jealousy that he no longer had a right to. "So… have you two…?"

"No," Trevor said, a little disappointed maybe. "Not that I didn't give it a shot. I thought it would make him feel better. Plus… well, it's Jackson, you know?" He smiled sadly and shrugged. "I had to try."

"He's worth trying for," Matt said.

"That's just it, though." Trevor folded his arms over his chest. It made his pecs bulge. Did he live in a gym? Matt found himself

trying not to act self-conscious. “He doesn’t think he is.”

Matt rubbed the back of his neck. “Look, Trevor… I don’t know how much Jackson has told you—”

“Basically everything,” Trevor said. “And I mean everything. We don’t really have proper boundaries. That’s mostly my fault.”

“Uh, right,” Matt said. “Well, I ended things between us because Jackson’s bound for Oxford, and I’m not sure I can follow him there. Not if I want to make any kind of a future for us. He needs to be able to go his own way, and he was already talking about giving it up just to stay here. You know how intelligent he is, how driven. He could be incredible, but not if he’s weighed down.”

Trevor rubbed his chin and tilted his head a little to one side. “Here’s the thing, man,” he said after a moment, “you’re out of your fucking mind.”

Matt blinked, and rocked back in his chair. “Excuse me?”

“What the hell are you even thinking?” Trevor asked. “I’ll tell you what your problem is. You still feel bad about schtupping a high school student. Because that’s how you thought about Jackson. And don’t get me wrong,” he raised both hands, “giving it to a high school student is a terrible idea. Attractive, at times, admittedly, but super bad.

“Thing is,” he went on, “Jackson is… not like other people. I know everyone says that about their kids and their best friends and shit, but seriously he’s put together from stuff that I’ve never seen before. Wicked smart, and unbelievably mature. You know why he and I never screwed around? Not even once?”

“Why?” Matt had heard Jackson’s version, but was curious.

“Because he’s just not driven by his base instincts,” Trevor said. “I know all about your campus-wide exploits. Seriously, like no boundaries between us. You don’t even know what it means, I think. For you to have woken that up in him, it’s… a big deal, man.” He took a breath, and sighed it out, all regret and wistfulness. “I’m madly in love with Jackson. At least I think I am. He’s got that effect on people, you know? It’s not just that he’s beautiful. He’s otherworldly for fuck’s sake.”

Matt only dipped his head.

“You need to rethink this thing,” Trevor told him. “You need to patch it up and make it work. Who the fuck cares about transient shit like careers and college? There has to be somebody in your life worth all that, doesn’t there? Or else what’s the point?”

“You’re asking me to derail both our lives,” Matt said. “If I want to say that I really do love Jackson, then I have to do what’s best for him.”

“With all due respect,” Trevor said, “that’s total bullshit. Not to

be a dreamy idealist here—even though I am—but if you love someone like that, you don't 'do what's best'. You stick together and make the rest work."

"He won't talk to me," Matt said. "He's done."

"Don't worry about that," Trevor said. "Let's just pretend for a second that he would, and that this could work out. Would you want it to?"

Matt tried to weigh it, but his scale was skewed. He rubbed his forehead.

"Dude," Trevor said, "it isn't rocket science."

"I know," Matt said. "Yes. If it could work, I would want it to. Of course I would. I feel like I lost a limb, like I'm… empty without him." His eyes burned and he had to close them and rub them with his palms to keep from embarrassing himself.

When he opened them, Trevor was standing. "Great," he said. "That's all I needed to know. Give me your number."

Matt did, but Trevor didn't offer an explanation. He just winked, and left the office, leaving Matt bewildered and staring at the door after it closed. Exceptional people made exceptional friends, he supposed. What Trevor had planned, he couldn't guess. But he did think that maybe Jackson had underestimated the man.

Matt's computer chimed at him, and he checked new emails. Students, with endless questions about the mid-term they'd be taking in two days. He sighed, and started working through them until he came to an email from Deanna. Another meeting… but under different conditions.

This time, he was meeting with the board as well.

He responded, checked the time, and then sat paralyzed with indecision for a long minute. When he finally pulled his jacket on and left, he still had no idea what he was going to do.

Chapter 19

The course was set.

Jackson stared at the thick packet of guides and brochures that Oxford had mailed him. Next to it was his passport, and his student visa. He should have been more excited. He'd worked so hard. So why wasn't he?

Trevor was good at this kind of thing. Jackson sent him a text. *Got in. Going across the pond. Celebrate?*

It only took a few minutes for Trevor to get back to him. *Absolutely. Dinner and booze! Classy style. Selma's.* A moment later. *8:30. C u there?*

Selma's. That was fancy. Maybe Trevor was making a last desperate attempt to woo him. Maybe it would work. That would be nice, Jackson decided. Anything would be nice about now.

See you then, he sent back.

The rest of the evening he spent picking through the packet and trying to get excited about it. He supposed, in a distant sort of way, he was. It just hadn't quite risen to the surface yet. It would, hopefully.

Oxford. He tried to imagine Gran being excited for him, but it just made his chest ache. The sale was almost finalized. Gran's ashes were stored at her house—Jackson's house, technically, though not for long—and Wendel had promised to wait for Jackson to come back for winter break to spread them over the farm. There was a hill at the edge, where Gran had her first supervised picnic with her husband, so the story went. That would be a good place for them.

Eight thirty crept up. Jackson made himself presentable for the first time in what seemed like weeks and probably was. If Trevor was going to go to the trouble of getting them a table at Selma's on a Friday night, Jackson figured he may as well make an effort, too. He tucked the packet from Oxford into his messenger bag and stored his passport and student visa safely in his desk, and headed out.

To his surprise, there was a car waiting for him. Well, well. He didn't even need to tell the driver where to go. It wasn't a limo—it was an Uber—but still.

Ten minutes later, it deposited him in front of Selma's, one of the nicer bistros in the campus region, and Trevor was waiting for him outside. He wasn't dressed up, but then Trevor probably didn't own anything that didn't have a drawstring or employ 'moisture wicking technology'.

"Thanks for this," Jackson said after they hugged. "It's kind of unreal, still. I don't think I believe it yet."

"You totally deserve it, man," Trevor said. "I'm proud of you.

Come on."

Jackson followed him in. It was a nice place. Jackson had only been there a couple of times. It was a strange mix of southern charm and middle eastern palettes, similar to their food. Black table cloths adorned the tables, gold trim lined crimson walls with some sort of treatment that made them look like red stone. The hostess led them toward the back of the house, to an intimate corner booth.

It took until Jackson was actually standing next to it to realize the table wasn't empty.

"Tell me how it goes," Trevor chimed, and all but bolted.

Matt looked up from one of two glasses of red wine. "You don't have to stay if you don't want to," he said. "But I hope that you will."

"Trevor," Jackson sighed. "Son of a bitch."

"I told him it was a bad idea," Matt said softly. "Was it?"

"Yes," Jackson said. But he couldn't quite convince his feet to take him away.

"So?" Matt asked.

Jackson sighed, and slipped his bag off his shoulder. He sat down on the opposite side of the table, and took the other glass.

Neither one of them spoke at first. They just sipped quietly. Jackson tried to decide what he should say. There was so much. He'd rehearsed a series of monologues to throw at Matt after graduation, but they were mostly just fantasies. Now, he couldn't even remember them.

"I heard the news," Matt said finally. "Trevor told me."

"Trevor does like to talk," Jackson said. "More than I imagined, apparently."

Matt grimaced, and nodded. "He does."

"I heard rumors there was a new tenure recipient for the lit department," Jackson said. "I guess that's you? Looks like we're headed opposite directions after all. You were right."

"Ah… not entirely," Matt said.

"Oh," Jackson said. "Shit, Matt… I'm sorry. Was it because of…?"

"No," Matt said. "No, they… they offered it to me. I turned it down."

"You what?" Jackson's mouth hung open. "Matt… what are you, crazy? Tenure? It'll take you years to land a deal like that again, if you can even find a place with an open spot. What on Earth were you thinking?"

Matt spread his hands and leaned forward earnestly. He took a deep breath. "I was thinking… that there are more important things. And that you're one of them. Or, maybe, you're the only important thing, and… I didn't want to be tied down here when I tried to make

things right."

That spike in Jackson's heart had grown numb in the past few weeks. But it had rusted as well, because it seemed to hurt much worse now that it was suddenly twisted. He shook his head slowly, and finished the rest of his wine in one go to try and dull the ache. "What makes you think you can?" Jackson asked. "What makes you think I want to face that kind of heart break again, Matt? Twice. You jerked the rug out from under me twice. In almost exactly the same way, except instead of waiting until graduation this time you waited until I lost the only person in my life that cared about me consistently, ever."

"I don't know," Matt said. "I knew it probably wouldn't work out. But… I had to make a decision, so I did.

"Jackson, I know I hurt you. I thought I was doing the right thing. I'm still not sure I wasn't, ethically, at least. But what I do know is that for six years I was miserable for having let you go because I thought it was the best thing for you then, and… and I've loved you since then." He sucked in a breath and closed his eyes. "I don't deserve another chance. But I had to ask. I had to find out. Because I don't think I can live with that loss for another six years, and certainly not forever. And if turning down the board's offer meant that I had the freedom to find out, then it was a trade I would make again in a heartbeat."

"I want what you're saying to be the right thing," Jackson said. "I want you to say something that wakes me up again, Matt. I really do. But it hurts. So much. I don't want to feel it again."

"Jackson, I can't promise I'll never hurt you," Matt said, his voice strained and taut. "I want to. I love you, baby. All I can promise is that if you let me, I will always try to make it better if I do."

"I want you to promise that you won't hurt me," Jackson said.

"I can promise that I'll love you," Matt breathed. "Love is going to hurt. Probably… probably a lot, I imagine. Maybe every day, for all I know. You'll hurt me, I'll hurt you." He reached over and took Jackson's hand, and Jackson didn't have the will to pull it away. Matt's grip was tight, and it felt good no matter how much he wanted it to make him angry enough to leave.

"I don't want anyone else, baby," Matt said. "If it isn't you… then I understand. But it won't be anyone else. I'll wait as long as I need to."

So. Those were the words. Jackson felt them sink into him. They didn't soothe all the pain there, really. They just sort of balanced it out, somehow. And maybe that's the way it was supposed to be. After all, it was a choice, right?

"I can't believe you gave up your tenure offer," Jackson

muttered, shaking his head. He wiped his eyes. “Let’s just be clear, I can’t be with a scrub.”

Matt’s face split with a grin, his wet eyes turning to humor as he shifted around the table to be next to Jackson, to kiss him, and hold him tight.

“And also,” Jackson muttered, “the next job you get is going to be at an all-girls school.”

They laughed, and kissed, and finally ordered food that they barely touched before they left together.

There was something newly electric about it when they crashed through Matt’s door, mouths locked together, hands swarming one another’s bodies. In a way, it was painful, but the pain was laced with need, and love, and somehow blended smoothly into a volcanic lust that made Jackson’s blood boil with desire.

They didn’t even make it out of the hallway.

Jackson fell on Matt like a predator, pushing him to the carpeted floor. There was time later for the slow, gentle pace of love making. This was raw; this was making up for lost time.

He tore at his own pants, kicking his shoes off and working them off his feet before he went to work on Matt’s. Those, he didn’t bother to pull down. He just tugged out Matt’s cock and swallowed it whole while Matt grunted, and then moaned, clawing his fingers through Jackson’s hair.

Jackson worked up all the spit he could. He didn’t plan on stopping for lube now, and he milked the thick tube of Matt’s rod until precome started to bead up at the top. When there wasn’t enough, he milked his own prick for more and added it to the mix. Some of it he gathered on his fingertips and smeared over his own hole, which was already warm and twitching with need.

Matt looked almost shocked when Jackson straddled him and began slip him inside. He gasped, and reached up to pull Jackson’s face to his to kiss him as he thrust up slowly to get all the way in.

It wasn’t going to last. It wasn’t supposed to. Jackson’s plan was just to get them both off fast, rest, and then do it all again. He tugged his hips forward and then pressed them back, taking Matt in and out of him while he tightened his ring to the point that it almost hurt and bit Matt’s lower lip hard. “Come for me,” he muttered, and sank back again, taking it all the way before he jerked his hips up and sank down slower. Twice before, he’d made Matt come in what seemed like seconds this way.

“Fuck… baby…” Matt groaned.

Jackson sat up, and braced himself on Matt’s chest. He tore the shirt that covered it open, sending buttons skittering against the floor

boards. He threaded his fingers through the hair there, and began to ride Matt's cock so that it ground against his prostate every time he took it in. He couldn't see straight. The only sense that seemed to work was the one that lit him up from the inside. "Come for me, Matt," he said again.

Matt's hand found Jackson's cock and began to stroke him. "Close," he grunted. "Fuck… come with me baby…"

Jackson sped up. "Don't you ever fucking break up with me again," he growled. Matt's fingers tugged and rolled his foreskin between strokes, getting more insistent, playing him perfectly so that it became a race. Matt's chest was already damp with sweat, and beads of moisture trailed down his own spine, tickling as they went.

"If you're gonna do this to me when I do," Matt grunted, "I'll make it a regular Tuesday thing." He moaned, and thrust up deep into Jackson's ass, his hand flying over Jackson's aching shaft. Precome already pooled around his navel where Jackson leaked.

Jackson pulled off almost entirely, and then dropped. Matt sucked in a breath. His cock swelled inside Jackson's hole. Another rise and fall. Matt strained, the veins on his neck standing out, and gathered the slippery stuff from his stomach that Jackson had spouted, and drew Jackson's foreskin back to torture the head of his prick until Jackson was howling.

They came together. When Matt started, he arched his back and then pistoned into Jackson's body over and over as he emptied himself. Jackson curled forward, and then arched his back and wailed as his cock exploded and his body vanished in a pillar of release that left him suddenly overcome with cackling laughter. He couldn't stop it, and Matt's continued treatment of his oversensitive flesh didn't help at all.

He collapsed onto Matt, and laughing became sobbing, and then went back again, full circle.

Round and round we go, he thought. But maybe that was just how it went. You couldn't help who you fell in love with, Gran had said.

True love was just a choice of who you got onto the roller coaster with, to ride it all the way to the end.

Epilogue

"Where's my copy of *Look Down in Mercy*?" Jackson asked, running his fingers along the spines of his and Matt's combined collection of books. "If these shelves were alphabetized I wouldn't have to wonder, you know."

"They're organized by era and author," Matt said from the office where he was packing up notebooks, laptops, and anything else that would fit into the handful of suitcases they were taking to England.

Jackson grunted, and picked through the authors as well. In six months, he still hadn't won this argument. He'd even gone so far as to re-organize the entire collection, but Matt had just gone back behind him and put them back and re-re-organized them into his arcane system. "It's not here," he called. "I had it just the other day, baby."

"Check under the bed," Matt suggested. "Or just wait until later. We don't need to finish packing until tomorrow. We're already going to be late as it is."

Jackson held his tongue about the fact that, as always, Matt tended to wait until the last minute to do everything. It was a wonder he'd survived being a teacher as long as he had.

When he turned away from the bookshelf, Matt was closing the distance. "Relax, baby," he said, and pulled Jackson to him, into a kiss that did precisely that. "Don't stress out. This is supposed to be fun."

"It is fun," Jackson said. "Being organized is fun."

Matt chuckled. "You're a helpless case." Another kiss, and he narrowed his eyes for a moment in thought. "It's definitely under the bed. You dropped it last night when I jumped you, and I think I knocked it under with my knee when I had you on the edge of the bed."

Jackson squinted until he remembered as well. "Oh, yeah. Hm. Memory's… a little fuzzy. Maybe if we go through it again…" He reached down and cupped Matt's crotch, massaging it for a moment while Matt's eyelids drooped, and his head rolled with pleasure.

But he didn't let it go on. "Later," Matt said. "Come on. Let's go meet Trevor and everyone. They're going to get wasted without us."

"Don't get wasted tonight," Jackson warned. "I'm gonna need you to be alert later when we pick this up again."

Matt promised, and they shuffled out the door to get to Selma's.

It was a surprising spread of people, given the circumstances. Tessa, who Jackson could now call by her first name, had driven up. Wendel had come. Trevor of course had organized the whole thing,

and even the head of the English department, Deanna Mason, had joined them. Already, she was courting Jackson about his post-Oxford future.

She congratulated Matt on his acceptance to an interim spot at Reading. After Matt's term had ended at Rose State, he'd looked for positions at every university within a hundred miles of Oxford, and they'd been excited to have him on, especially after Professor Layton had offered his recommendation.

"It'll be a great fit," she said. "Hopefully both of you can come back after Jackson finishes his Ph.D. I'd be happy to have you working together." She raised an eyebrow. "Of course, there's no policy against faculty being involved romantically, so that should make things somewhat… less complicated?"

Jackson opened his mouth a bit, but closed it before he confirmed or denied anything. Probably all that mattered to Deanna was that there was no public scandal involved and if it worked for her, then there was nothing to say. "I'll certainly consider it," he said. "Some of the best years of my life were here."

"I fully expect Oxford to try and steal you away," Deanna sighed. "But I appreciate the consideration."

Trevor hugged them both, and chucked Matt on the shoulder. "So. All set?"

"No," Jackson said. "We still have a lot of packing to do."

"We don't have that much," Matt said. He smiled at Trevor. "And yes. All set."

It wasn't the time to argue. Instead, everyone had wine, and a spread of appetizers and tapas was brought. Tessa was there with her fiancée.

Jackson and Matt hadn't kept their relationship secret for very long after Jackson graduated, and by that time Matt had taken a second term in a freshman class just to keep a job—and the town house—until it was time to leave for England. For six months they had been more or less open about it, but it was still somewhat novel, meeting with other people like this. He squeezed Matt's knee under the table, and pecked him on the cheek.

About half an hour into dinner, when second bottles of wine were beginning to arrive, Trevor disappeared. Jackson began to look around for him when he didn't come back soon enough to have just been gone to the bathroom. He leaned toward Matt. "Did Trevor leave?"

"No," Matt said. "It's fine. He'll be back."

That smelled funny. Surprises made Jackson nervous. Knowing Trevor, he was bringing in a stripper or something bawdy like that. If Deanna saw a stripper dancing on Jackson, or Matt, Jackson was

going to die of embarrassment. Surely he wouldn't. Would he?

Trevor did show up, though, sans stripper, just a few minutes later. He bent to Matt's ear, and passed him something.

Jackson watched the exchange with suspicion, and tracked Trevor's shit-eating grin all the way back to his chair.

"Okay, what's going on with you—"

Matt stood up, and the table when silent. "Thank you, all of you, for being here to see us off. It's a huge change, and long journey, and having you all here to see the beginning of it means a lot to me."

Well, they didn't leave until tomorrow, but, it was the right thing to say, and everyone clapped.

And then Matt turned, and knelt. Jackson watched him mutely as he took Jackson's hands in his.

"Jackson Greene," Matt said, "we've had ups, and downs, and more ups and more downs."

"Baby," Jackson muttered, "what—"

"Let me finish," Matt said. "I never imagined that I would meet a man like you. I never imagined, when we did meet, that it could work. I nearly screwed it up. Twice. But I never will again. You win, baby. Just like you always do."

He took one hand away, and reached into his pocket. When he brought it back out, there was, resting in his palm, a simple velvet box that was unmistakable as anything except what it clearly was.

Even so, when he opened it, Jackson grew dizzy, and his vision blurred. "Holy… Matt… I…"

"No," Matt said, "that part comes next." He winked, and the gathered party chuckled, though they sounded far, far away just then.

"Jackson Greene," Matt said, "I want to love you forever. You're my choice. And I want to be yours, if you'll have me. Please, please say that you'll be my husband, because if not… this will all be very embarrassing."

Jackson laughed, and stared at the expectant faces looking on. He couldn't even see them, or the ring, clearly, but it didn't matter. It could have been a loop of yarn.

"Yes," he croaked. He had to swallow, and try again. "Yes. Obviously, yes."

Matt fit the ring on his finger, and surged up to kiss him while their friends cheered them.

Someone tapped Jackson's shoulder from behind in the middle of it, and Jackson turned to look up at what appeared to be a police officer.

"Jackson Greene?" The officer asked.

"Uh… yes?"

Trevor giggled, and Jackson rolled his eyes.

“You’re under arrest,” the cop said, “for being too hot in public.”

Music started, Trevor howled with triumphant laughter, and to Jackson’s utter mortification, Deanna and Tessa cheered as well as the cop began to strip.

“Enjoy it,” Matt muttered in Jackson’s ear. “Or don’t. I don’t care. You know who you belong to.”

“You, baby,” Jackson laughed, and kissed him. “Always you.”

And that was how it started.

END

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About the Author:

Cait Forester lives in the shadow of the Appalachian Mountains with her husband and one very unruly Shepherd mix! She's a firm believer that a little bit of love and hard work can fix just about anything, and the healing power of love is one she explores often in her works.

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Keep Me Still

By Stephen Hoppa

Acknowledgements:

I wish I could say I was capable of writing a book on my own, but I have a pile of people to thank for helping make this a reality, including my beta readers, Peri Rivers, Susanna Hays, Kenna Madison, and Amy Tasukada. And I have to give enormous thanks to Lou Kelly for having a firm hand and not being afraid to let me know when I needed to make major edits to bring out the story I was trying to tell. Also, a shout out to my dope proofreader, Kellan Larkin—seriously, you're totally ace. Thank you, everyone!

Chapter One
The Night I Crashed Into a Bear

My headlights glowed through the fog, reflecting off the beat up mailbox—the only sign of civilization for miles. Aching fever made even the small effort of steering the car down the gravel drive exhausting. The tickle in my throat had become a searing knife, slicing at my esophagus every time I swallowed. I'd probably fall asleep in the backseat before I made it back to town. That was the only good thing about living in my car—like a snail dragging its house wherever it went—I could curl up in my sleeping bag as soon as I finished this delivery. Assuming the guy ordering pizza to his house in the middle of the woods wasn't a serial-killer… which he probably was. I should've said no to a delivery this late, but I wasn't in a position where I could afford to lose my job. I wasn't exactly thinking clearly, either.

I rubbed my burning throat, trying to swallow slowly so it wouldn't hurt so much. At least if the owner of this haunted death-forest did end up murdering me, I'd probably get him sick. The thought actually made me feel kinda shitty, because he was probably just a nice guy, and I'd probably get him sick anyways.

I focused on the drive and tried to keep my eyes open. Ivy spilled out of the trees and tangled over the gravel, which wasn't so much a driveway as a private road leading deeper into the forest. I jolted as a small four legged animal dashed out of the brush, eyes glowing through the thick fog. I didn't normally startle that easily, but I was so exhausted that my reactions were both delayed and exaggerated.

I eased up on the gas, because I'd been going too fast. The trees pressing in on made me feel claustrophobic and eager to get out of there. My foot felt like a lead weight as it slipped back down against the pedal.

Of course, if Axel were still looking for me, he'd only need to find where I worked and offer to pay enough to get me to drive out to where no one would hear me scream. I tried not to let myself think of that, but felt for my knife anyways, and found my pocket empty. Must've fallen out.

I stretched down, searching the floor with my fingers. I really needed to scrape together the money for a gun, but the thought made me cringe. Didn't want to think of myself as someone like Axel and his thugs. Didn't want to think of myself as someone who could kill people without even flinching.

I glanced back up—too late—praying the enormous creature in

my headlights was a hallucination from the fever. It wasn't. The car skidded in the gravel as I jammed the brake to avoid hitting the ten foot bear towering up on its hind legs in front of me. Guilt twisted up from my gut as the car crashed into the helpless animal. I lurched forward, then back into my seat as the sound of metal scraping metal screamed through the night.

I opened my eyes slowly, head throbbing. The bear stood in the dim light of my busted headlights, exactly as it had before I'd run into it—it wasn't even moving.

It was a statue.

I rubbed my temples as I realized that I'd have to tell the crazy person living in the middle of nowhere that I'd wrecked his statue. He'd probably sue me. Or murder me. Or sacrifice me to his bear-god.

My hands trembled as my fingertips finally found the knife wedged between my seat and the door. I tucked it into my pocket. It wasn't much more than a sharp letter opener, but it helped calm the heavy throbbing in my chest. Sometimes.

I leaned back in my seat and pulled my sweatshirt tight around my neck. The fever made it hard for me to think of what I needed to do. I really just wanted to close my eyes...

Exhaustion pulled me down into the same dream I always had. The one where everything falls apart.

When my eyes opened, I was freezing, and staring into the bear's face. I jolted back, throwing my body into the passenger's seat, trying to scramble away from the enormous animal sticking its head into my car.

Just as I reached for my knife—wondering if I really could thrust the blade into an innocent animal's throat—I realized it wasn't the bear. It was a man. My fingers tightened on the knife.

"Are you okay?" Even his voice was like a bear's, deep and growling.

I nodded and swallowed a painful gulp.

"Are you hurt?"

I shook my head.

He took a step back, folding his arms over his enormous chest. His eyes moved under his dark eyebrows—to my messy hovel in the back seat—back to me—to the pizza box I was crushing in the passenger's seat—back to me.

"Was wondering why I never got my dinner." He reached his hand out.

I blinked for a second, not really sure what I was supposed to do with the enormous paw. My second's hesitation seemed to draw a small growl from his throat, but maybe it was just a cough. I thrust my palm into his. The warm callouses of his hand closed around me as

he jerked me forward and pulled me from the car into the cold, dark morning. My head pounded as he forced my feet to the ground.

"You're hurt."

I shook my head. "Just sick. Not hurt."

He frowned and pulled the crushed pizza from the car. "Come inside."

He didn't say anything else before turning up the drive. I looked at the mess that used to be my car. The driveway forked in two directions around the statue, but I hadn't seen the turn in the darkness. The front of my car was crumpled against the dented legs of the bear statue. I sucked in a breath as I realized that if the statue had toppled forward, it probably would've crushed me.

I looked at the wreck one more time, then back at the bear-man walking up the drive. His feet stopped crunching in the gravel. He turned.

"Are you coming?" He didn't sound angry, but the way he said the words made it seem like he wasn't used to people not listening to him.

I stroked my thumb over the knife in my pocket and took a step forward. If I had another option, I was too exhausted to think of what it might be.

The pounding in my head intensified as I caught up to his heavy tread. My breath burnt on its way out. I could barely put one foot in front of the other. I paused to rub my temples, and he stopped in front of me.

"Hold this." He handed the pizza box to me.

I was confused as I took it, and even more confused when he scooped me into his arms and pulled me into his enormous chest. My face burnt with fever and embarrassment.

"You don't have to—"

"Relax."

Again, I got the impression that he wasn't used to people arguing with him. The heavy *thud thud* in his chest matched the pace of his feet. I could sense the strength in his entire body as he walked steadily up the drive. I'd never thought of myself as a small guy, but he lifted me like I weighed nothing. I hadn't realized I'd closed my eyes until I opened them and he was shoving open the thick wooden door of a log cabin.

He didn't kick his boots off before crossing into an open living room and laying me on a leather couch. The plushness swallowed up my tired bones. It felt so good to lay down somewhere that I could stretch my legs out. I'd been sleeping in my car for so long, I'd started to think my back would never feel right again.

I checked to make sure the knife hadn't fallen out of my

pocket. I didn't get the sense this guy would hurt me, but I wasn't going to let my guard down—no matter how good that would feel. I knew what horrible things people were capable of. Even the people who seemed nice.

"Sorry about your statue," I croaked.

"Doesn't matter. The last guy who owned the place left it here. Said it looked like me." He snorted and the skin around his eyes crinkled in the warmest smile I'd ever seen. For the brief second that it flashed across his face, It was a wash of sunlight breaking through the clouds. The kind of smile you *feel*. It only made it harder to keep my guard up. Made me uneasy.

"I can see the resemblance," I said, trying not to return his smile.

I really did. The guy had the kind of beard that I could never grow. I scratched my smooth chin, trying not to think of how my boss had given me the nickname 'Baby-Face.'

The bear-man had the kind of muscles I could never grow either. He would've towered over almost anyone he met. A small patch of dark hair sat in the hollow of his breastbone, right below his thick neck, and I got the idea that there was a lot more hair under his shirt. Even the way his brown eyes stared out curiously from under thick eyebrows was bear-like.

And then there was that dominating territorial energy that radiated from him.

He took the box of pizza from me. "Do you want me to call a tow truck?"

"I don't really have money to pay for a tow truck." I rubbed my hot eyeballs. My exhaustion doubled as I realized that if my car were towed, I'd be out of a place to sleep. My head ached. My everything ached.

"I'll pay for the towing." His warm smile had disappeared and his voice was a gruff command.

"You don't—"

"It was a stupid place to put a statue." The bear-man threw the open box of pizza on the coffee table."You want some?"

I shook my head. "I don't eat meat."

"Hm?" He grumbled around a mouthful of pizza.

I put my hand over my eyes to block out the glare of the light. "I read this study that said pigs recognize their own reflection, horses can read expressions, and cows have best friends."

"Sounds like a terrible use of a scientist's time." He bit into the slice of triple meat lovers with extra ham.

"Still." I swallowed. "I don't want to kill something with feelings. I don't want to eat someone's best friend."

I heard him toss the pizza slice back into the box. I looked over to see him with his hands folded under his chin. He stared down at the box pensively. After a while, he scooped the slice back up and took a big bite. He spoke around the crust, cheese and meat as he said, "Nothing left now, but to eat. Wouldn't it be worse to waste it?"

He shoved the box in my direction, but I just shook my head. "I still can't eat someone's best friend."

"Maybe this cow didn't have friends. Maybe he was an asshole."

"Maybe." I rested my head back into the couch and closed my eyes. "But I can't take that chance."

My whole face screwed up in pain as I swallowed slowly. I heard the bear-man throw his food back down and stand.

"Open your mouth."

"What?"

"I said open your mouth."

I blinked up at him as I let my lips part. He put a huge hand to my chin and pulled my jaw open further. Pain burnt down my throat as he took out his cell phone and used it as a flashlight to peer into my mouth. Instinct told me to pull away, but something in his touch kept me from moving. My heart pulsed as I stared up into his dark eyes.

"You have strep throat."

"Are you a doctor?"

"I've had strep before." He dropped his hands from my face and put his phone back in his pocket. "The inside of your mouth looks like the set of a horror movie."

His heavy footsteps crossed away from me. I heard him wash his hands and start tinkering in the kitchen. I was desperately trying not to fall asleep again, but it felt so good to put my head down. I was pretty sure I'd drifted off when he walked back and dropped a glass on the table in front of me.

"Drink." He sat back down and started eating again.

I looked at the glass of brown liquid."What is it?"

"Brandy and honey. It'll help your throat."

I eyed the glass. Even if I had been watching him mix it, I probably wouldn't have accepted a drink from a stranger.

"This is why I never order this shit." He threw the pizza back down into the box and scraped his tongue across his teeth, scowling. "It always tastes like shit."

His eyes turned to me. I was still staring at the glass.

"You don't need to be suspicious." He grabbed the glass and put it to his lips. His adam's apple moved up and down as he took a drink and put the drink back in front of me. "I told you. It's just brandy and honey."

My fingers inched towards the glass. I would've done anything to make the pain in my throat go away. I tucked my hands under me and shook my head. "I don't drink."

He cleared his throat in that growling way. The space between his knees widened. He looked at me like he still expected me to drink it.

"Sorry," I finally added.

He swiped the glass off the table and downed the rest of it in one gulp. "I'll take you to the doctor when the office opens. Until then, sleep."

"What? Did I miss something?"

"You have strep. You need antibiotics."

I shook my head even though it hurt. "You don't have—"

"If you were going to go to the doctor on your own, you would've gone by now. I'm not going to let a sick kid wander into my house and leave without getting help."

"I'm not a kid." Heat touched my face again. I tried not to think of my boss's nickname for me. "I'm twenty-three."

"You're sick, though." He took another bite of pizza. "I told you to sleep."

I exhaled another fiery breath. I didn't want to let my guard down. Didn't want to give in to the sleep dragging me under. Didn't want to let my eyes close. That's how everything falls to shit. You blink for one second...

Chapter Two
You Shouldn't Feed Wild Animals

She just kept crying. When I reached my hand out, my fingers only scratched her face, leaving deep, bloody tracks. A shadow stole up behind me, swallowing us both.

I bolted upright, stumbling out of the tangle of blankets, falling onto a wood floor. I wasn't in my own bed. Axel wasn't there. My sister wasn't there. I hadn't been home in three months.

Then I remembered the crash, and the man who'd brought me into his house.

Shit.

I put my hand to my forehead as I rose. The last thing I remembered was lying on a couch, and now I was in a bedroom. I half-recalled a warm body carrying me up a flight of stairs. The

thought of someone moving me—touching me while I was asleep—made my skin prickle.

I opened the door and heard soft classical music drifting up from the lower floor. The knife was still in my pocket. The wood floor creaked as I followed the stream of music down the hallway. A heavy, packing *thud thud thud* rose over the music as I found the stairs.

A thick, savoury scent floated through the air, making my stomach burn with hunger. I didn't know what was making that smell, just that I wanted to devour it. The first floor was one open space. Not big or luxurious, but everything was comfortable; plush furniture; soft rugs; warm woods. The unlit fireplace set into a stone hearth would've tempted anyone to curl up and fall asleep in the blanket slung messily over the back of the couch. I closed my eyes and clenched my fingers around the knife, refusing to let my guard down.

The *thud thud thud* grew louder as the music hit a dramatic climax. Violins, trumpets, pianos all lost their shit at once, louder, louder. *thud thud thud*. I reached the bottom of the stairs and stroked the knife. Then I saw him—standing outside the open glass doors leading to the deck.

thud thud thud

His fists collided with the punching bag in time to all the instruments blasting from the stereo. Sweat dripped down his bare torso, meandering between the valleys of his bulging muscles, soaking the waistband of his shorts. He grunted as he pulled his arm back, flexing every muscle as he threw his fists into the punching bag. His plush lips pressed together in concentration. *thud.*

I felt hot, feverish. I looked away. The punching stopped. So did the music. His heavy footsteps entered the house.

"I didn't get your name." He threw open the oven, making the mouthwatering scent blast through the air. "I asked, but you'd fallen asleep."

"Did you move me while I was sleeping?"

"I didn't want to wake you when I started cooking."

I eyed the pan of pink fish he was dishing out onto two plates. It's hard to be pissed at someone serving you food when you're starving.

"My name's John," I said after a second's hesitation.

He let out a small laugh. "Okay, John." He said the name like it was a joke. "My name's Cody."

He plunked the plates down on the wooden slab of a table, and sat down. I couldn't help diving at the food. My hands shook from hunger as I picked up the fork. I couldn't remember the last time

someone cooked for me. I couldn't remember the last time someone did anything for me. It made something uneasy squirm in my gut. I looked down at the glistening pink fish, stroked my thumb over my fork, and set the utensil back down.

"I don't want you to do any of this stuff for me," I said, trying not to look at the food in front of me.

"Don't lie to me, kid." Cody stuffed a forkful of buttery fish into his mouth. "You've got problems and you're just praying someone can fix them."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood upright. "What makes you think that?"

"I fix problems for a living." He set his fork down and wiped his face on a napkin. "I know them when I see them."

"Are you some kind of therapist?" I frowned.

"Something like that." He put his fist in his palm and cracked out three *pops* from the joints.

"So you're good at reading people's minds?"

"Something like that." One of the corners of his mouth twitched upward. His eyes fell to my untouched food. "Look, you don't need to freak out. I'm just trying to feed you."

That wasn't reassuring, but I couldn't deny how starving I was. I looked back to my plate and grabbed my fork. I licked my lips as I scooped up the flakey meat, and told myself that fish definitely didn't have feelings. After one bite, I couldn't hold myself back. I ignored the pain in my throat. Crumbs spilled down my front as I devoured the meal. I didn't bother with the napkin as my lips became slick with butter. I just licked all the deliciousness off them.

Cody pulled the empty plate away from me quickly—like he was afraid I was going to eat that, too. He scooped another slab of fish onto it and tossed it back in front of me. I devoured the second serving almost as ravenously, feeling his watchful eyes.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"What?" I finally picked up the napkin to wipe my face, feeling just a twinge of regret as I looked at the mess on my plate—fish didn't have feelings, right?

Cody cleared his throat. "You said you don't have any money."

"That's not a question."

"Here's the question…" He reached into his pocket and drew out a stained envelope. "If you have no money, then what's this?"

The hot food churned in my gut. "Give that to me."

"Easy. I'm just trying to understand what's going on here."

"You went through my car?"

"I took out all your stuff before I called the tow truck."

"You had my car towed?"

"I would've offered to fix it myself, but you probably don't want to wait for me to order parts." He ran his fingers over the envelope. It felt like his hands were creeping up my spine. "I washed your sleeping bag and your clothes, because they stunk. That's when I found this." He opened the envelope and started thumbing the cash inside.

"Give that to me." I lunged across the table.

"Relax." He jerked his arm back. "I'm not trying to take anything from you. I told you I just want to know what's going on. You're living in your car, hiding wads of cash, giving out fake names. What kind of problems are you dealing with?"

I gripped the fork as Cody fingered the crumpled bills in the envelope. He wasn't counting them. His gaze was fixed intently on my expression.

I tried to ignore the hissing in my ear begging me to pounce on him. I couldn't lose my temper after he'd fed me, but he wouldn't stop stroking the bills. Just as the hissing turned into a scream, and my hands balled into fists—he tossed the envelope across the table.

I snatched my money, shoving it into my pocket. "That's none of your business."

"Probably not." His chair groaned as he leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "But I'm trying to help you out."

I shook my head. "I can't let you help me."

He went quiet, just watching me, thinking silently behind his curious brown eyes. Finally he stood and turned to the stairs. "I'll drive you to the doctor after I shower. Your stuff is in my car. I'll drop you off wherever you want after I get you some medicine."

"Thanks," I said. I didn't really mean it. I was too lost to feel any gratitude. The guy seemed to think he solved problems for a living, but it felt like he was causing a lot of them. Drop me off? I had nowhere to go. I couldn't go home. I had no idea where my car was. I had nowhere to sleep and I wouldn't be able to go back to work if I couldn't drive. I put my face in my hands, feeling the hot flush, and leaned into the table.

I still hadn't figured out what I was going to do when Cody returned from the shower. His thick, dark hair was still wet, and his tanned skin glowed from the hot water. A white t-shirt stretched across his chest, and jeans hung from his hips.

"You ready?" he asked as he slipped his boots on.

"Yeah." I could hardly feel less ready. I had this feeling like I was forgetting something, even though I hadn't brought anything in with me. I patted the money to make sure it was still there. Then I patted the knife in my other pocket.

I looked back at the cabin as I followed Cody out to the SUV

sitting in the driveway. There had been one second, while I was inside his cabin, when I'd felt like I could relax. Maybe that's what I was leaving behind.

I got into his car and let him drive me the hell out of there. The knees of the bear statue were crumpled and scarred, but my car was gone as we drove past the scene of the crash.

"The garage I had your car towed to is a bit backed up, but you can pick it up in two weeks." He pulled a business card from his pocket and handed it to me. "They have my billing information, so don't worry about the cost."

"Thanks," I said as I took the card.

I wanted to tell him not to pay for it, but that wasn't really an option. I leaned my head against the window and let out a sigh. The only thought that came to mind was, *fuck*.

"What's that?" I sat up, eyeing a tree on the horizon—it was covered in a mess of shoes, hanging by their laces, tangled up in the branches, dangling like men at a gallows.

"You've never seen a shoe-tree before?" Cody cocked an eyebrow.

"What is it?"

"I just said it was a shoe-tree."

"Okay, but why does it exist?"

"People just throw their shoes in it. No real reason." Cody shrugged. "You're not from around here, are you? Bet you're a city-boy." He winked.

I closed my mouth and looked in the rearview window as the tree grew smaller until it disappeared.

The only walk-in-clinic in town was packed when we arrived. When the medical secretary asked my name, I hesitated, glancing around the room.

"Uh, it's uh…" My heart started to pound. It felt like just saying my own name would send a twitch through Axel's ears—wherever he was—and he'd come running to squeeze his hands around my throat.

The secretary rolled her eyes and asked for an I.D. She let out an exaggerated sigh as she jotted down my details, as if to say, *was it really that hard?* I felt stupid for annoying her, and even more stupid for how nervous it made me to see my information recorded. I guess, in a way, I had been trying to wipe myself out of existence when I ran. Felt safer that way.

She handed the I.D. back and had me fill out a form before telling us to sit. I stared at the wall so I wouldn't have to look at Cody. He felt like a cop sitting next to me all huge and quiet.

Across the room, a mother was trying to keep her three small

boys from tearing up magazines. One of them stamped his feet. Another one started to bawl and scream.

I frowned, remembering the last time I'd seen a doctor. A kid at the park had thrown a rock at my sister. So I punched him in the face—then he snapped my wrist and shoved my mouth full of dirt. When I whimpered home, My mom bound my arm in a compression wrap and told me it was just sprained. After three days, I finally broke down crying and begged her to take me to the doctor. We had to ride three buses. My little sister Maddy kicked and screamed in the waiting room, because she was hungry. I remembered the condescending way the doctor looked at us, and how my mom had yelled at me on the bus ride home.

I didn't hate her anymore. She hadn't been a great mom, but sometimes your best just isn't good enough. Sometimes it's not even close.

Well... I tried not to hate her. Some days I succeeded. Other days I couldn't manage to unroot that knot of ugliness no matter how hard I tried.

I stopped that thought.

The guy sitting on the other side of the waiting room was staring at me. He had a black eye and a split lip that contrasted jarringly with his dress shirt and tie. A healed over gash ran across his forehead under a mess of stitches. He must've been there to get them taken out.

Why was he staring? My fingers grazed the knife through my pants as I met his gaze—no, he wasn't staring at me—he was staring at Cody. He looked like he was going to say something until Cody's eyes flickered up from the fishing magazine he was reading. The guy with the stitches sat back, suddenly frozen.

I looked at Cody, then back at the guy. Trying to guess where the tension was flowing from. Even the crying children went silent, like they could sense something was off. I felt Cody's dominance pressing down on the room, freezing everyone in their seats as the clock on the wall ticked above our heads.

Finally, the doctor called us into the office. The spell broke. It only took the doctor ten seconds to peer into my horror-movie-mouth before he wrote me a prescription and sent us to the pharmacy across the street to get it filled. I popped one of the pills into my mouth as soon as we walked out of the building, not even bothering with water.

"So where to now?" Cody asked.

"Uh..." All my lostness hit me all over again as I climbed back into Cody's SUV. "I guess… can you take me to the corner of Easton and Sall?"

His dark eyebrows closed in. "That's where the homeless

shelter is."

"Yeah."

"I'm not dropping you off at a homeless shelter."

"Well..." I shrugged. "Then just leave me here, because it's as good as anywhere."

He made that growling noise in his throat, and started the vehicle. I clipped my seatbelt as he pulled out into the road.

"Why was that guy looking at you?" I asked.

"What guy?"

"That guy in the waiting room with the gash in his head. You saw him. He was staring at you."

"He cheated on his wife." He tapped his index finger against the steering wheel. "She hired me last week to talk to him about honouring his wedding vows."

"Oh… isn't it against the rules of therapy to tell me that? Client confidentiality or something?"

"Sure."

"So you're a marriage counselor?"

"Something like that. I do a lot of different counseling." His hands tensed on the steering wheel. I could still see the red marks on his knuckles from where he'd hit the punching bag. Dark purple scars showed under those; patches where the skin had been torn and healed —over and over.

"Hey, you missed the turn."

"I told you. I'm not taking you to a homeless shelter. You're coming back to my house."

"You're forcing me to stay with you?"

"No. I'm inviting you to stay with me, and you're going to accept, because you want to."

"You can't just invite a stranger into your house. I could be a serial-killer for all you know."

"I'm not too worried about you."

"Well, you should be."

His lips parted in a small laugh. His eyes crinkled. "I'm not going to worry about the sick kid who's afraid of eating a cow's best friend."

"Well… you should," I repeated.

He didn't say anything else. The car kept driving further and further towards the outskirts of town.

"I'm not staying with you." When he didn't stop driving I lost control of my voice and broke into an ugly shout. "Turn around!"

He looked over at me, his fingers drumming on the steering wheel. He coughed in that growling way again. I fell into the door as he pulled into a U-turn.

I exhaled, and I didn't really know if it was a sigh of relief or something else.

Cody drove in silence until we reached a parking lot in front of a dingy building. Based on the peaked roof, it had been a church at some point, but now it was just a place for homeless addicts to spend a few hours out of the cold. Spits of rain spattered the windshield. A couple guys stood outside the building smoking. Cody watched me as I grabbed my things from the backseat and reached for the door handle. He shifted suddenly like he was going to stop me, but he didn't make a move.

"It was, uh, nice meeting you," I said as I opened the door.

"Hey."

He gripped my wrist. I froze. But then he popped open the console and fished out a pen.

"When you realize you need help…" He pushed my sweatshirt up and dragged the pen across my wrist, scrawling out a quick number. "Call me."

I looked down at the phone number he'd written on my skin, and back up into his face. I wasn't sure what to say, so I didn't say anything.

"I'll see you around, John," he said with just the smallest, gruff laugh.

"Thanks for… everything." I think I meant it that time.

I clutched my sleeping bag and the gym bag with my clothes in it as I jumped from the vehicle. I had that feeling again, like I was forgetting something. Maybe it was because I was realizing that I had so few possessions that I could carry them all in my two hands. I didn't watch as the SUV pulled out of the parking lot. When I finally did look, Cody had completely disappeared.

I tried not to breath in as I walked through the cloud of smoke pouring from the guys outside the doors. Tried not to make eye contact either. I knew the drill.

I was lucky they had a bed available. A small place like that usually filled up before the afternoon. I asked if I could use a phone, because my cell phone hadn't worked in over a week. My stomach twisted as I punched in the number for the shitty little pizza shop I worked at. The phone rang and my boss picked up. I recognized his mumbled voice immediately. It was like he was always eating something.

"Hey, it's, uh, Adam," I said, hoping I'd remembered the name I'd been using. I'd changed towns so many times. Changed jobs. Changed names. It was getting hard to keep it all straight.

There was a pause, then a noise of recognition and a long laugh. "Baby-Face."

"Right…" I licked my lips, paused, and continued. "I won't be able to make it into work for… for a week… or so."

"Does this have something to do with the guys who showed up looking for you?"

"What?" My stomach stopped twisting and dropped out of my body.

"Four guys came in last night. Said someone'd seen your car parked outside three days in a row. Said they were looking for the brown haired guy with a crow tattooed on his neck."

I slid my hand over my neck, subconsciously trying to hide the black dove inked there.

"You in some kinda trouble, Baby-Face?" He stopped and sounded like he was shoving something in his mouth.

My heart pounded against my chest as he continued.

"Dirty bastards were creepy as fuck. Told me to tell you your step-dad's looking for you." The line was silent for a long time before he asked, "You there?"

"Yeah… I'll…" I couldn't focus on anything except my heart punching my chest. "I can't come back to work. Sorry."

He was still saying something as I dropped the phone to the receiver. I wouldn't have been able to hear him anyways. I stared at the numbers scrawled on my arm, but there was too much adrenaline flooding my veins for me to read them.

I patted my pockets to make sure everything was still there: knife, money, pills. Then I checked again. I grabbed my things and wandered away from the phone, down the hallway. I had to sit down. I had to think. I had to figure out what to do.

There were two cramped rooms filled with beds. I found the one I'd been assigned, and curled up on the thin mattress. I had more reasons than ever to not let my eyes close, but I couldn't stop them.

I couldn't stop anything.

Chapter Three
I Met The Devil Again.

Fever scorched my skin when I woke. It was dark except for the fluorescent light flooding in from the hallway. I wasn't sure what time it was, or what time I'd last taken one of the antibiotics. It didn't matter. I was taking another one.

I eased up and pulled the little bottle of pills from my pocket. Just swallowing the tiny pill made my throat burn. I fell back into the shitty mattress and closed my eyes, holding the bottle to my chest, thinking of that brief second when I'd felt like I could relax.

"What you got there?"

"Cool it. It's just antibiotics." I didn't open my eyes to see who I was talking to. It was best not to make eye contact.

"Then you won't mind if I check them out."

"I would mind that a lot."

A creak sounded from the bed next to mine. Footsteps crossed to me and the were covers thrown back from my shivering body. I opened my eyes just as the scrawny guy snatched the bottle of pills. He squinted at them in the dim light.

"It's antibiotics," I said again. My little glimpse of hope in all that shittiness was clutched in his dirty hands. I breathed slowly, trying to keep my muscles from tensing as my pulse pounded. I couldn't let myself lose control.

The guy twisted open the bottle and popped one of the pills in his mouth. The vein in my temple throbbed. His throat moved as he swallowed one pill and reached for another. My controled breathing turned into a growl. I leapt from the bed, feeling the cold ache in my body. The adrenaline throbbing through me made up for how weak I was. I ripped the bottle from the guy's clammy hands, and clenched my fist around the plastic. I had to get a hold of myself. I had to stop. I had to think. I couldn't lose control. I had to. Stop.

If it hadn't been so dark, I might've seen his fist before it caught me in the face. I fell back as another punch *crunched* against the cartilage of my nose, sending pain searing through me. His filthy fingers dug for the bottle in my fist. The pills flew everywhere, scattering in the darkness. I couldn't stop whatever was flooding my veins, begging me to lose control. I let my fist fly into his face. Again, and again, ignoring the pain in my body as I listened to his skull cave in under the force of my punches. He toppled backward and I leapt on top of him, dropping the empty bottle as I put one hand on his throat, and the other fist in his mouth.

I wasn't listening to the noise around me. Just the sound of my hot breath and thrashing punches. Whimpering groans. Pleading. A light flickered on and I stared into the bloody face of the man beneath me. Someone tore me from him. Over the sound of my pounding

heart, I heard someone shout, “Call the cops!”

My stomach twisted, and I thought I would throw up. The dirty, stinking room was awake and staring at me. The guy I’d beat up lay in a bloody mess on the floor. I looked down at my fists. They were covered in blood. I lurched forward like I was going to throw up again. I couldn’t find myself in all the ugliness taking over my brain.

I twisted sharply to break away from the guy holding me. He tried to grab me, but I kicked him in the knee. I snatched my bag and tore towards the door—stopping as I saw the empty prescription bottle. I grabbed it. An arm caught me, but I pulled around and threw my fist into the guy’s face. I was seeing everything around me, but I wasn’t taking it in. My ability to process information had been swept away by the rush I felt. It wasn’t even anger—it was just thirst. I wanted to hit someone again. I wanted someone to try to stop me so I could knock them to the ground.

My bloody fists shook as I made for the door. A voice inside of me begged me to stop. I had to get out of there before the cops showed up.

I had to get the fuck out of there.

My legs shook as I pushed out the front doors. A cascade of rain poured down on me, soaking me to my core, but doing nothing to cool the fever burning me up. I kept walking, because I knew if I sat down, I wouldn’t stand again. I still didn’t know what time it was. The street was dark and deserted.

Feeling came rushing back. I was freezing. I was aching. I felt sick in every way imaginable. I dropped my bag, because I couldn’t carry it any further. My stomach twisted as I put one foot in front of the other. I still felt the blood on my hands, even though the rain should have washed it off.

A street-light flickered in the parking lot down the street, illuminating a grungy telephone booth. I squeezed my hand around the empty bottle as pushed myself toward the phone booth and collapsed inside onto the dirty floor. I wasn’t crying, but I felt like I was crying. I felt that hopeless exhaustion that always accompanies tears. I’d thought I hit rock bottom when I’d crashed into the bear statue, but now I’d give anything to be back there.

I brushed my fingers across my wrist and read the faded numbers out loud. My stomach unclenched just a bit. Looking at the lifeline Cody had left me made me feel like I had some kind of hope.

I leaned my head against the telephone booth and exhaled a burning breath. I unclenched my fingers and let the empty bottle roll out into the rain. There was no hope, and I knew that, but sometimes it felt good to trick myself into thinking that there was.

I think I fell asleep again. At least, it felt like a chunk of time

went missing. When I woke, it was still dark. I was still wet.

I looked at the number on my arm, then up at the phone. I couldn't help laughing through all my fucking misery, because even if I'd wanted to call the guy, I didn't have a fucking quarter.

I put my hand to the wad of cash in my pocket. It was all completely worthless. I couldn't spend it. My gut twisted at the thought. Everything I'd done had only made everything worse. I leaned my head against the wall, and reached up to the phone cord, tugging on it, so that the phone fell from the receiver and dangled there.

I didn't even know why I was trying so hard to survive. Some days, it didn't feel worth it. Some days, it felt like I should just do the world a favour and let Axel find me. He had garbage friends all over the state. If I really wanted to live so bad, I should have gotten the hell out of there, driven until I couldn't get any further from him. But I still couldn't leave. Sometimes I still drove back to the city I grew up in. Sometimes I sat outside the cemetery until I fell asleep.

Step-dad…

He only called himself that to piss me off. He'd never married my mom, and even though he'd fathered Maddy, he'd never been a dad to either of us. It didn't seem possible that someone as nasty as Axel could be related to someone as small and sweet as my sister.

One night when I was eleven, and Maddy was five, we were home alone with the power cut off. I didn't know where our parents were, just that we were starving. All I scrounged out of the fridge was a jug of sour milk and ten packets of sugar. Maddy just kept saying, '*I'm hungry, I'm hungry,'* and there was nothing I could fucking do about it. I just broke and started crying. I've always cried too much for a guy. Axel made sure I knew that.

Maddy had taken my hands and led me out to the balcony. She poured the sugar packets onto a plate and said the fairies vanished our parents for the night so we could feast with them under the stars. The sky was the orange haze of exhaust fumes and dingy city lights as we licked sugar from our fingers. There were no stars. No food either. But Maddy was a little blue eyed fairy. She'd always made things better. Until I made her hate me.

The last time I saw her, she'd been crying, so now whenever I tried to picture her, I saw her crying and that made it feel like she'd been crying all this time. She'd thought it was my fault my mom was dead.

Maddy told me if I hadn't put so much blame on my mom, she wouldn't have overdosed. Sometimes I wondered if I'd tried too hard to protect my sister from how horrible her parents had been. Sometimes I wondered if I hadn't tried hard enough.

My breath burned as I exhaled.

I could never forget the awful things Maddy had said to me before the funeral—or the awful things I'd said to her. And all I'd wanted was to hold her as she cried. The memory made my skin tingle and feel numb all at once. Sometimes love is just tearing the people around you to pieces.

I closed my eyes and pressed my hand against the envelope again. I'd never figured out how to piece our relationship back together. Everything I'd done had been for nothing…

I let my hand drop from my side and closed my eyes, imagining my fever as the fires of hell, eating me up. Felt warm. Good.

The dial tone on the phone started *beep beep beep beeping,* like it was crying, begging me to pick it up before it hung itself on its own cord.

"Sorry," I murmured.

I shifted on the dirty ground and felt something cold and round under my hand. A tingle prickled up my spine as I raised the quarter to my eyes. It might have been the first lucky thing that had ever happened to me. I looked at the numbers on my wrist. They had faded, but I could still make them out.

beep beep beep beep

The phone was begging me again, but now it was for something different. I closed my fist around the quarter and squeezed my eyes shut. I'd been out of options. Now I had one.

Just one.

My head felt light as I stood and slipped the quarter into the phone. Fingers trembling, I punched the numbers in, praying I'd read them correctly. Then I slumped back to the ground, my legs too weak to stand. The phone rang…

and rang…

and rang…

my stomach twisted into knots...

I hadn't realized how much hope I'd put in those numbers. My skin felt cold and hot at the same time. My heartbeat started to pound in time to the slow, desperate, *ring... ring... ring…* "Yeah?" A deep, sleepy voice came through the line. My heart stopped, and then started hammering.

My voice was barely a whisper as I said, "I need help."

Chapter Four
Let's Get You Out of Those Wet Things

I'd fallen asleep again, but I woke when the headlights blasted into the phone booth. I opened my eyes as Cody's huge bulk leapt from the car and bounded through the rain towards me. He stretched his hand out, exactly like he'd done the first time I'd met him.

This time I didn't hesitate.

He pulled me up so fast that I fell into his body, but he just wrapped his arms around me and helped me through the rain into the SUV.

"Where's your stuff?"

"Dropped it. Back there." I raised my hand to point down the street.

Cody clipped my seatbelt on me and slammed the door. When he didn't open the driver's side, I realized he'd gone off in the direction where I'd dropped my gym bag. I leaned into the pre-warmed leather seat as I waited… and waited…

"I couldn't find your sleeping bag," Cody said as he pulled the driver's door open and threw my gym bag into the back seat.

"You didn't have to get that for me."

"You look awful. Do you need to go to the hospital?"

I shook my head and swallowed.

The heat of the car soaked into my bones as we drove back out to the middle of nowhere. Another chunk of time disappeared, and then I felt a pair of strong arms lifting me from the seat. I'd never felt so helpless, and it didn't feel anything like I'd expected it to. I leaned into the strong body carrying me into the warm, dry house, and I felt myself letting go of everything that had helped me survive up until that point.

I didn't resist the hands stripping my wet clothes from me, or the clean blankets. I didn't resist the exhaustion pulling me under, or the warm body that lay down beside me. I hadn't realized how cold and numb my skin was until I felt his heat against me.

I was breaking every rule I'd ever made, but only because I was finally broken too.

I had the first dreamless sleep I could ever remember. I was so warm when I woke up, but it wasn't from the fever this time. I sat up suddenly, shaking the heavy arm off my body, unable to remember a time when waking up didn't involve scrambling to remember where I was.

Cody lifted his head sleepily. There was a small smile behind his dark beard, and his eyes crinkled as he looked at me.

"Why are you in bed with me?" I tried to sound angry, but it

came out terrified. I pushed away from him and realized I was stripped down to my boxers. We hadn't—no—my clothes had been soaked. He'd taken them off for me.

"You asked me to stay," Cody said as he sat up. "You were freezing. I thought you'd go into shock if you didn't get warm. I was close to taking you to the hospital, but you begged me not to."

My breath gushed in and out of my chest. I hadn't asked him to get into bed with me. He was lying… or maybe he wasn't. My face burned, and this time I was certain it was from embarrassment. "Just because someone says something, doesn't mean you should do it. I was delusional. I was completely out of it. I was asleep."

"Sorry." He looked me up and down. "I didn't mean to freak you out."

I chewed my lip as I realized that I hadn't just been delusional when I'd asked him to get into bed with me. I'd been delusional when I'd called him. I shouldn't have been asking a complete stranger to take care of me and all my messed up shit.

The envelope of cash, my knife, my wallet, and the functionless brick that used to be my cell-phone were all set carefully on the nightstand. I looked back at Cody, wondering if he saw messed up guys like me every day as a therapist—wondering if he was freaked out.

He threw his legs out of the bed and stood, stretching all his enormous muscles. The heat in my face doubled as I realized he was only wearing a pair of tight boxers. He rolled his neck from one side to the other, popping out a *crack* from his spine.

"I left a message with the doctor last night. Told him you lost your antibiotics. I went through your things and I couldn't find them."

"You went through my stuff again?"

"You know how bad it is to stop taking antibiotics mid-treatment? That's how fucked-up super diseases get started."

"That's not the point."

"You could fuck the whole world up if you don't get more antibiotics."

"You can't just touch my shit whenever you want." I clutched the blankets around my exposed body. I felt that lump of anger sitting in my stomach.

"I don't mean to be a bastard here, Travis." He turned to me, folding his arms over his chest. "But you don't seem capable of taking care of yourself. Better let me do it for now."

"Fuck you." My entire body was hot. He knew my name. He'd gone through my wallet. He'd gone through everything. I felt so completely naked and vulnerable.

I stopped. I was losing control. My knuckles stung from the

night before. I couldn't let that happen again. Good fucking God, I could never let that happen again.

I took a few breaths, surprised at how easily my anger towards Cody melted. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I… I appreciate you coming to save me."

Save me. The words tripped off my tongue before I realized what I was saying.

"You ready to talk about your problems yet? Maybe tell me why you were huddled in a phone booth at four in the morning? Or why your face is all fucked up?"

I fell back into the pillow, staring up at the grain patterns in on the sloped wood ceiling. A long sigh flowed from my chest. "I don't really have the kind of problems that a therapist can help with."

"You'd be surprised at the kind of problems I can fix."

"Well, then, I can't pay for you to fix all my problems."

"Think I'll do this one free of charge."

I snorted a laugh, even though I wasn't sure what was funny, but something felt like a joke. I didn't say anything for a long time.

"Have you ever had clients who were angry?" I asked without looking at him.

"Everyone I deal with is angry."

"No, not just pissed. Angry. Deep down at the center of it all, just so fucking angry."

"I think you're still describing everyone."

"Maybe." I swallowed. It hurt, but less than it had the day before. I didn't say anything else.

Finally, Cody stood and walked to the door. "I'm making breakfast. I'll drive in and get your prescription refilled after we eat. There are clean towels in the bathroom." He paused in the doorway and tapped his fist against the wood. "You should probably shower… you don't smell great."

I lay in the cozy room for a while before I worked up the energy to move. I sighed, stood, stumbled to the bathroom down the hall, dropped my boxers, turned on the water, slumped to the floor of the shower, and let the heat pour down over my skin.

Save me. The words circulated around in my head with no real thought attached to them. Just an echo of what I'd said earlier.

When I'd dried myself off, and dug a pair of clothes from my bag, the smell of bacon blanketed the air. I tried to ignore the tantalizing scent of sizzling pig flesh, but my stomach growled as I descended the stairs. Cody was dressed, though with the tightness of his shirt, he might as well have been topless. I could make out every curve of his chest as my eyes followed down his torso to where it tightened into concrete abs.

He scooped eggs onto a plate next to thick toast slathered in yellow butter.

I sat at the table before he'd even put the food down. His plate had three strips of crispy bacon on it. He hadn't put any on mine. I devoured the toast so fast, I almost choked. My stomach was still growling when I looked down at the egg.

"You don't eat eggs either?" He bit into his bacon. "You know they're not animals, right? They don't have feelings or best friends."

"I'm just kinda thinking about…" I poked at the yolky egg with my fork. "... about how they keep chickens in dirty little cages in the dark, and that's their whole life. It's all they get. Just so I can eat breakfast."

A laugh rumbled from his chest. "C'mere."

He stood from the table and walked towards the glass doors that opened onto the deck. I followed him as he pushed open the doors. The punching bag rocked back and forth on the chain it hung from. Cody pointed out into the wild back yard.

"See that?"

"Wha—" I stopped. I did see. Little white balls of feathers, scurrying around under the trees, pecking at the dirt, all moving together like a school of fish. Something about the calm way they flowed together was relaxing, like watching waves on the ocean.

"I think my chickens have a pretty good life." He left the doors open as he turned back to the table. "But you do what you want."

He sat back down and bit into his bacon as I shoved the eggs into my mouth.

"So you're like a therapist-farmer?"

He laughed into his glass and set it down on the table. "Depends on how loosely you define those words. I have some chickens. Bought some goats last year." He shoveled a forkful of eggs into his mouth. "But it turns out goat milk tastes like ass. The goats ended up going pretty wild—careful if you go wandering around. They can be pissy if you run into them. Had one charge right into my ass last week. Thought about eating them." He sucked bacon grease from his thumb. "But I can't bother wrangling them, so they're just kind of annoying pets now."

"You would just let me wander around your property by myself?" My eyebrows pressed in together. Was he turning me into an annoying pet, too?

He eyed me up and down. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know…"

He wiped his face on his napkin and tossed it down on his empty plate. "So, I'm trying to understand what your deal is… someone's looking for you, or at least, you think someone might be

looking for you."

"How—"

"You're using fake names. You lose your shit whenever someone glances at you twice. You're scared." He leaned his elbows on the table and folded his fists under his chin. "I think you stole that money. I think whoever you stole it from is looking for you. I think you ran into them last night. That's why your face is fucked up, and that's why you called me." He stopped, taking in my expression, then frowned when I didn't respond. He ran his fingers over his thick beard. "The question I'm asking myself is: why did you steal it? Must've been a reason, otherwise you would have spent it already."

"You're talking shit."

He squinted at me, like he was looking for something in my face. "I wanna say you stole it to get away somewhere, but if that were true, then why are you still here?" He paused and raised an eyebrow, as if he'd asked a question I would ever answer.

"Do you just like the sound of your own voice?"

"It's all right." He shrugged as a grin spread across his face. "There are a lot worse things I could be listening to."

I snorted, hating myself for being so rude. I either had to relax around Cody or stop trusting him entirely. There was no reason to be snarky and aggressive to someone who was trying to help me. He just put me on edge. Made it hard to control myself.

"I should get going." He stood from the table. "I have shit to get done today."

"So you're just leaving me here?"

"I'll be back in…" He squinted at the clock and paused. "I'll be back at two."

"What do you want me to do until then?"

"Whatever the fuck you want. The T.V.'s there." He jerked his arm across the open floor plan of the cabin. "Your bed's upstairs. Outside is over there. Just do whatever. I'll be back soon."

He walked to the door and plucked a leather jacket from a hook, sliding his boots on.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I rose and took a step towards him. "Why are you doing all this?"

"I told you." He slid his arms into the jacket. "I like fixing problems. And you seem like you've got some interesting ones."

"You're wasting your time if you think you can help me."

"Yeah well, I'm a pretty cocky bastard." He straightened his shoulders, forcing the leather jacket to stretch against the bulge of his muscles. "Even if you're right about me wasting my time, I probably won't figure that out until it's too late." He winked and suddenly I felt feverish again.

Chapter Five
Annoying Pets, Broken Junk, Cornered Animals

I walked back into the living area, feeling like I was somewhere I shouldn't have been. He'd just left me alone in his house. He didn't even know me. His carelessness made me uneasy.

I could've rooted through his bedroom, seen what kind of dirty secrets he was hiding behind all that relaxed confidence. I could've opened up his laptop, gone through his porn history, gawked at his fucked up kinks. I could've opened him up like he was forcing me to do.

But I'd never been that kind of guy.

I flicked on the television, and cuddled up in a soft knit blanket on the couch. I tried to follow a movie that was already twenty minutes into the plot—a guy had been kidnapped by a bounty hunter, because he'd been mistaken for his twin brother. The guy developed Stockholm syndrome and started to believe he really was his twin. By the end of the movie the guy was dead, but I'd fallen asleep, so I didn't know how he died.

I looked at the clock, rubbing my eyes. It was ten after two. Cody should've been back already.

I stretched as I rose. I already felt so much better than I had the night before. It was probably the food. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a good meal. Eating well hadn't been a priority for a long time.

I padded aimlessly across the floor. Again, I considered going through Cody's shit, only because I was so bored. Maybe I'd see how he liked having all his secrets spilled out... although part of me didn't think he'd mind in the slightest. Cody seemed too honest for his own good.

Instead, I pushed open the glass doors and stepped out onto the deck. I leaned against the punching bag as I watched the sea of chickens flow under the trees. I tried counting them, but it was pointless. I wanted to say there were more than fifty, but the way they moved around, I might have been counting the same ten chickens over and over. I wondered why they stuck so close to the house if they had

that whole property to wander over. Maybe they thought they were safe near the bear-man's cabin. I could see how they might feel that way.

I dropped into a wooden deck chair and kept watching the chickens scratch across the lawn, weaving in and out of trees and long grass that had gone completely wild. At least it was more interesting than day-time television.

I hadn't realized how long I'd been sitting in peaceful silence until the door slammed inside. Cody's heavy footsteps seemed to shake the entire cabin as he walked through it, out the back door.

"You should take one right away." He dropped a bottle of pills in my lap and tossed me a water bottle. "I got you a toothbrush too, and some, uh, cleaner clothes. I'll put them in your room."

"Do therapists really make that much money?" I looked down at the pills to hide how awkward I felt. "How can you afford to do this for a complete stranger?"

"A toothbrush costs, like, a buck." Cody laughed. "Believe me, you're not emptying my bank account."

Even as an adult, I found it hard to escape the world where toothbrushes and clothes were luxury items. As kids, Maddy and I were more likely to get yelled at for being sick than taken to the doctor. I scratched at the label on the prescription bottle.

"You know, I'm feeling a lot better, so you probably didn't need to bother getting these."

"Didn't I tell you that's how incurable super-diseases are created? Once you start taking antibiotics, you gotta keep with it."

"Wouldn't want to fuck the whole world up…" I stared out at the lawn.

"Are you feeling okay?"

He put a big, warm hand to my face. There was a fine moistness on his palm, and my forehead felt hot as he took his hand away. He had this sense of entitlement, like he could touch whoever he wanted, whenever he wanted. I wondered how he'd feel if I did the same to him. I really, really wondered.

He shrugged, turned, and threw a fist into the punching bag. "Your fever's gone at least." He threw another punch. And another, aimlessly taking the shit out of the bag. I looked away as the sack swung and groaned on its chain, feeling a strange sense of empathy for it.

Finally, Cody turned to me, wiping the sleeve of his T-shirt across his face. His eyes fell to the bottle of pills in my lap. "I told you to take one of those."

I chewed my lip as I twisted open the bottle. It bothered me the way he told me what to do, and I just did it. I wanted to resist

him, but his gaze didn't leave any room for argument. Something about his eyes made my tongue too heavy to speak. I popped a pill in my mouth and took a swig from the water bottle.

"Atta boy." He winked. It brought my fever back all over again.

"C'mon," he said as he walked back inside.

I counted to thirty before I got up and followed him. I didn't want him to get the idea that he could call me, and I'd come running, even though it was probably true. When I did turn into the house, he was carrying an armchair, just lifting the entire huge thing in his hands.

"Get the door." He jerked his head at a door opposite the kitchen.

I did. Only because I really wanted to find out what the fuck he was doing. He had to turn the chair awkwardly to fit through the doorway that led to a garage. The space was huge, full of junky old cars. Cody threw the chair to the floor.

"Sit."

I was so lost in the weirdness, that I didn't even stop to think about how immediately I'd reacted to his command. I sunk into the chair and he picked the blanket off it and threw it over me. Then he turned to the closest junk heap and opened a tool box. It took me a full five minutes of watching him to realize he just wanted me out there with him while he tinkered away with what looked to be a piece of crap. I had yet to figure out if he was just a nice guy, or if he wanted something from me, and this wasn't adding to my understanding.

"I'm starting to think you're trying to Stockholm me into trusting you."

He laughed as he dropped a wrench into the toolbox. "You think I kidnapped you?"

"I dunno. I don't exactly feel like I can leave."

"Oh, shit." He looked at me with mock seriousness. "I think you've already got Stockholm syndrome. You don't even realize I've kidnapped you."

I snorted, resisting the urge to laugh.

He shook his head as he stuck it under the hood of the car. "I'm just waiting for you to talk."

Was that all he wanted?

"Something tells me you have a lot of experience making people talk."

He just laughed.

"So you're a therapist-farmer-mechanic?"

"I just like fixing shit. I like finding broken junk and making it

work again."

"Ouch."

He looked up at me. Laughed. Looked back down. "The last guy who owned this place dumped all these old cars on the property. I don't really know what he was trying to do with them, but he left all his shit here when I bought the place. At first I sent a bunch to the junkyard, but then I thought maybe I could fix some of them."

"What's the point? What are you going to do with them once you fix them?"

He shrugged.

I couldn't figure out what Cody wanted from me. It made me uneasy, and even more so, because I was still so tempted to trust him, to just fall into his arms and cry, *save me!* I chewed my lip as I watched him mess around with his car. No one wants to be around a guy with problems like mine, not even a therapist who wants to fix everything.

"You hungry, Trav?"

"Trav?"

"You don't like that?"

"No…" I shook my head. For a split second, I'd been pulled into a daze. "Just ... my sister's the only one who's ever called me that."

"So you have a sister?" His lips spread into a smile.

"Yeah. I'm hungry." I stood and set the blanket on the chair.

"Hmm, so you don't like talking about your family." He took a step towards me. His hands were stained and greasy. His posture was way too confident for how close he was moving towards me. "What's your story, Trav?"

He was so close to me that I could feel the heat pouring off his body—no, wait, that was me again. The heat was pouring from me as I looked into his brown eyes. I dropped my gaze.

"What's on your shirt?" I frowned as I spotted the red splatter staining his chest.

He looked down. Looked at me. Paused. "Got a burger on the way home." He twisted his hands in the hem of his shirt and tore it over his head. "Must've spilled ketchup on myself."

I wasn't thinking about the stain anymore. I wished I'd never mentioned it. I looked up from all that skin and dark hair to see the grin on his face. So hot. He let out a small laugh and gripped my chin in his huge hand.

"You are so fucking cute." He gave my face a shake before dropping his hand and turning to the door.

Shock overpowered the embarrassment flushing my face. Was *that* what he wanted from me?

I scrambled into the house after him and tried to string together enough words to form a sentence that would distract me from… everything. “Do you have family?”

He looked at me and laughed again. I didn’t know why.

“I grew up in Alaska.” He washed his hands in the sink. “My parents still live there.” His eyebrows closed in as he turned his huge bare chest to me. “Been thinking a lot about going home lately.”

“That’s… great.” My mouth was too dry to say anything else.

“You want a sandwich?” asked the shirtless man I was trying not to look at.

“Yeah. Sure. Thanks.”

I started to think I really was getting Stockholm syndrome. The longer I spent in the bear-man’s territory, the harder I found it to control my actions, and thoughts, and... everything.

He paused in front of the open fridge and frowned. “I’m not really sure how to make a sandwich without meat.”

“Just make it with whatever.”

“Can I make you a side of whatever to go with your whatever sandwich?”

“Hah.”

It didn’t matter what he put on the sandwich. I couldn’t taste it. I couldn’t focus on anything except Cody sitting shirtless across the table from me. His hard nipples begged me to look at them. Every sculpted muscle taunted me. He was teasing me—or testing me.

I breathed in. Out. Fighting the tightness in my chest. If he wanted what I thought he wanted... he was asking for too much.

The problem wasn’t that he was a man. Well, that wasn’t the biggest problem. I’d been attracted to guys before, but I’d never imagined connecting on a level that would ever make me want to act on my attraction.

No, it had nothing to do with that; and everything to do with the reason why I broke up with my last girlfriend; and the reason why I hadn’t dated anyone since.

“Your throat’s feeling better,” he noted around a mouthful of food. “You’re swallowing properly. Not making a face.”

I hadn’t realized that until he said the words.

“I guess I don’t need to stick around here if I’m feeling better,” I said quickly.

He dropped the crust to his plate and sucked a drop of mayo from his thumb. “You’re not running off.”

“You need to stop.” I pushed my whatever sandwich away, realizing how terrible it tasted. “This isn’t going to end how you want it to end.”

“Who says I want this to end?” He continued sucking

condiments from his fingers.

"Why are you messing with me?"

He frowned. "All I want to do is help you."

"That's a lie." I picked at the crust on my sandwich.

"You think I'd lie to you?" He rose from the table. Had he always been that tall?

"I think you want something you're not going to get." I shook my head as I stood and instinctively backed away from him towards the wall.

"You wanna know what I think?"

"I'm not sure." I tried to meet his eyes to tell him he couldn't intimidate me.

"I think you're scared."

I swallowed. "Is that your professional opinion?"

"Something like that."

He took a step towards me. I backed away.

"I think you're very, very scared of something." Another step. "And I think I know what it is."

My back pressed against the wall, but he just kept moving towards me. He looked like a bear again as he straightened his shoulders, using all his height. If he thought he was an animal cornering his prey, he had no idea...

"You're scared of how much you want to stay here." He ran his tongue over his lips. "You're scared of how much you want me."

"Don't." I stared up into his deep brown eyes, my heart expanding and contracting so hard it hurt. Somehow he turned all my anger into fear, and then he turned that fear into… something else…

"I don't think you want me to get away from you." He put a hand to my hair and let his fingers trail down my cheek.

I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to look at him, but I could still feel his hand. I could feel his hand and it felt so fucking good. I inhaled. Exhaled. Tried to keep calm. It felt like he wanted me, the way he touched me, the way he looked at me. It felt like he wanted to take me in his arms and…

"You need to stay away from me," I breathed without opening my eyes. I couldn't look into his face.

"Trav?" His fingers grazed my jaw, stroked my lip. "Are you okay?"

I pressed my face forward, just barely so that his thumb pushed against my lip. My breath trembled in and out of my lungs, and then stuck in my chest. I could barely hear him. My pulse was a crashing ocean in my ears. My fingers felt inside my pocket.

"What is it?" He murmured in a whisper, his breath falling on my face. He moved closer to me, the heat of his body coming down on

me like a cage.

"I said stay the fuck away from me." My eyes flew open as I pressed my knife into Cody's throat.

Chapter Six
Watch Where You're Putting Your Hands

Cody didn't flinch as the blade pressed against his skin. His gaze darted down to my hand, and then back up to my face. "Wasn't expecting that from you."

"I keep telling you…"

"Are you telling me you don't want to put your mouth all over my body?" He put his hands on either side of my head, trapping me in his hugeness as he leaned into the knife. The soft skin of his throat pressed against the blade until I could almost see it split. "Are you telling me you don't want my mouth all over yours?"

"I'm telling you to stay away from me."

I stared into his eyes. He stared into mine. The only sound between us was my pounding heart.

Finally he said in a low growl, "Put the knife down."

My hand trembled, making the knife shake against his throat. Defying Cody felt wrong, like going against my own instinct.

He said it again, "Put the knife down."

The handle was slick in my sweaty palms as the strength in my arms went out.

His eyes crinkled as my hand fell to my side.

"Now I really wanna know what you're scared of." He slid his fingers over mine, and drew the knife away.

"You have no idea what you're asking."

"Maybe not." He tucked the knife into his pocket, smiling faintly like it was all a joke. "But I want to find out."

"You're not going to."

"I will." He leaned in, just barely, but I felt even more trapped by his body. "Because you want me to." His eyes sent a shiver through me as they scanned me. "You want me to help you."

"You're a fucking idiot." I exhaled slowly, trying to fight the way his eyes ripped out all my secrets.

"Just talk." His voice was a silky purr. "Let me help you."

His voice crept inside me. Words started pushing their way out of my mouth and I couldn't stop myself.

He wanted to know so fucking bad?

"Have you ever had to come home from school to see your mom drunk on the kitchen floor, with bruises all over her face?"

"Keep talking." His voice was so calm that it almost silenced the trembling in my hands.

"Have you ever tried to protect the people you loved? Watched your family tear itself apart?" My breath shook as it left my chest. I could still feel my little sister's body cowering behind me, clinging to my shirt. "You think you want to know what I'm scared of, but you don't. No one wants to know about that kind of shit."

Cody wrapped his arms around me so fast I couldn't stop him. His words rumbled from his chest as he whispered into my hair. "I told you I want to know everything. I just want you to let me get close to you."

I shook my head against his shoulder, trying to resist the effect his deep musk had on my tense muscles. "That's how people get broken. They let violent assholes into their lives and they let them stay until there's nothing left of their hearts to smash."

"You're so, so wrong, Trav." His arms slid up and down my back, so strong and gentle. "I'm not like that. I'm never going to hurt you."

"I'm not talking about you." I exhaled shakily. "I'm talking about me."

"What?" He pulled away from me to look into my eyes. For the first time, I'd shocked him.

"I don't want to hurt anyone." My voice was barely a whisper. I looked down to where I could see my knife sticking out of his pocket.

"You're not making any sense."

"You don't know me." I put my hands to his chest, but I couldn't move him away from me. "I'm just like them. Axel and all the other pieces of shit my mom dated. Awful, violent assholes."

"That's not true."

"It is." My throat was so tight that it hurt all over again. "If you knew me, you would hate me."

"You're wrong."

I looked down. I couldn't stand his face anymore. He thought he could handle me. He thought he could help me. He might've even thought he could fix me. He was a fucking idiot, and I was a fucking idiot for wanting to believe him.

"Cody, I… I get angry. I get violent. I hurt people. If I let you

get close to me, I'll hurt you. I know I will."

Cody's hand stroked over the back of my neck, tracing the black dove tattoo, but he didn't say anything. My head swam, and all I could feel was his hand on my skin.

"I don't believe you'd ever hurt anyone."

"I beat the shit out of a guy." My hand shook. I still felt the blood clinging to my knuckles. "He took the medicine you got me, and I couldn't stop myself. I lost it." I rubbed my hand over my knuckles like that could change how awful I felt. "When I get upset, I yell. I tear people to pieces. I… I just lose control. I don't ever want to lose control with someone like you."

"Travis, you grew up in a very broken situation." His voice was a hypnotic rumble. "Violence is just a subconscious reaction for you. You're not a bad person. You just need to unlearn the patterns you grew up with so you can trust yourself again."

"Is that some of your therapist shit?"

He looked up at the ceiling. His tongue ran over his lips. For a second, he looked like he was going to say something, but he just sighed instead. "Yeah, that's some of my therapist shit."

"I feel sick." I put my face in my hands.

"C'mon." Cody scooped me into his arms. I couldn't resist his strength as he carried me up the stairs. I couldn't resist anything about him. He carried me like I was a baby bird, like he was so convinced that I was something gentle. He believed it so strongly, that he almost had me convinced too.

He dropped me gently in the bed and laid down next to me. He didn't ask if it was what I wanted. I didn't tell him that it wasn't.

"You're not a bad person," he murmured into the back of my neck. "You're so fucking sweet, I can't even stand it."

"Cody… I make people feel so shitty they want to die."

"I don't know who told you that, but it's not true."

"I like you… you're a nice guy… I don't want to do that to you."

"You won't." He slid his hands up my torso.

"You need to leave."

He breathed deeply against my neck for a long time before he said, "I'm not going to do that." He rubbed the back of my neck, teasing my hairline, tracing the outline of my tattoo. "Because I don't think that's what you want." He pulled me closer to his warm body. "You don't want me to leave you, do you?"

The room went silent. All I could hear was my throbbing heartbeat and the soft sound of Cody's breath against my neck—right until I fell asleep in his arms.

Chapter Seven
Waiting Out The Storm

Cody was gone.

That was the first thing I realized when I woke up.

The room was dark. Thunder rumbled in the distance. My stomach responded with a grumble of it's own. I didn't know what time it was, but I knew it had been more than twelve hours since I'd taken one of the antibiotics.

I wondered if I was fucking the whole world up yet.

I fumbled with the bottle on the nightstand and swallowed a pill without any water. The envelope of cash still sat on the nightstand.

The thunder growled closer as I rose. I didn't want to leave the bed. I didn't want to see Cody or deal with everything he wanted—or everything I wanted.

My empty stomach pushed me downstairs. The house was quiet, except for the the low hum of music coming from the stereo. It sounded like some kind of opera. A lady was going to town in a high pitched voice.

I looked out on the deck, then opened the garage door. I stopped moving and listened again. All I heard was the high pitched lady and the distant storm. Then I heard my stomach.

I felt awkward as I poked through his fridge, but I had a sense Cody wouldn't care. He probably would've loved for me to make myself at home. He refused to accept that I didn't belong there.

Meat. So much meat. Leftover burgers, raw bloody steaks, and marbled deli slices filled the fridge. I grabbed the bowl of eggs and dug through the cupboard for a frying pan. The thunder rumbled louder as I cracked an egg. Shells ran into the goopy mess in the pan. Cooking had never been something I'd mastered. It's a hard skill to acquire when you grow up never having enough food in the house. I tried to pick shells out of the slime as it started to solidify and stick to the pan.

A gust of wind ripped through the house, drowning out the music, as the front door opened and slammed shut. My shoulders stiffened.

"You put on my favourite song."

"It was on when I woke up. I didn't touch anything," I said quickly, feeling like he'd accused me of something.

"Must've forgotten to turn it off." He walked to the stereo and

turned the volume up.

It was like I could feel his enormous shadow on my back as he approached me.

"How old did you say you were?" he asked. "Twenty-three?"

"Why?"

"Just wondering," he sniffed. "How you're twenty-three years old and never cooked eggs before."

"I've cooked eggs before." I fought the heat in my face.

"Doesn't look like it." He grabbed the pan from the stove, dug a fork from the sink, and scraped the mess into the garbage. I wasn't going to tell him how much that bothered me. He rinsed the pan out and set it back onto the stove, turning the heat down to medium.

Cody hummed along with the music, deep in his chest so it came out as a low rumble. "He was dying when he composed this."

"What? Who?"

"This music. It's called *Stabat Mater*. Pergolesi was twenty-six when he composed it." He opened up a butter dish and dropped a thick slab into the pan, humming as he did.

"Wow." I stopped and really listened to the piece of music for the first time. The woman almost sounded like she was sobbing as she belted out the words in a language I didn't understand. Violins cried along with her. I wasn't even sure if it was really music. If I had to describe what ache sounds like, I'd say *Stabat Mater*. But something about it really was beautiful.

I shook my head. "I can't imagine accomplishing something like that by the time I'm twenty-six."

"No shit." Cody cracked four eggs smoothly into the pan. "I'm already twenty-eight and it feels like I haven't done a damned thing in my life."

"You help people, don't you? That's not nothing."

He frowned.

He looked older than twenty-eight, but not in a bad way. It was the beard, and that his eyes creased deeply when he made any expression. The light wrinkles around his eyes and forehead gave him a look of being mature, responsible, trustworthy. A nice guy. He made it so hard for me to keep my guard up. I couldn't let it slip. It was for his own damned good.

And mine.

The scent filling the air smelled nothing like the mess I'd made before. I didn't know how it was possible that he could throw eggs into a pan and they instantly became delicious, but I did the same thing and my efforts ended up in the trash.

Another rumble of thunder rose over the music.

"You can hear the desperation." Cody closed his eyes. "He died

of tuberculosis just after writing this. It's weird how all his hopelessness comes through in the composition… and how beautiful it is."

"So you're a composer now, too?"

His eyes snapped open. "I just like music."

Spits of rain crashed against the window as we sat down to eat.

"Shit weather, huh?" He looked up with a lazy half-grin that threatened to melt me.

"Can we stop this?" I dropped my fork to my empty plate.

"Stop what?"

"You're pretending nothing happened. I want you to stop." I was trying to sound demanding, but somehow Cody turned all my words into gentle pleading. I was never in control of my feelings around him. That scared me. A lot.

He leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head, licking his lips. "I'm not pretending anything."

"Lying won't change anything." I put a finger under my plate and tipped it up. I let it fall back to the table noisily before doing it again. He hadn't been listening to a word I'd said. He didn't believe that there was something awful inside of me. He was still trying to get close to me.

"I don't think anything needs to be changed. Maybe your opinion of yourself, but everything else seems fine to me."

My hand tensed. My arm jerked. The plate went flying off the table and smashed into pieces on the floor.

"Easy." His eyebrows knit together. "Didn't realize you were so clumsy, Trav."

"Stop calling me that. I never said you could call me that."

"Sorry, Travis," he said in a deep, patronizing tone as he stood and pulled a broom from the closet next to the fridge. "You need to relax, Kid."

"Don't call me that either." I ran my hands through my hair. The music and the storm were working together to give me a throbbing headache.

Cody poured the smashed-up plate into the trash can and put the broom away. He leaned against the counter and folded his arms over his chest as he stared me down. "Would you rather I go back to calling you John?"

"I want you to cut this shit out." I slammed my hand on the table.

"Ah, I get it." His eyes crinkled as his face spread into a grin like he'd just grasped the punchline of a joke. His shadow fell over my face as he stepped towards me. "You're trying to show me how big,

bad, and scary you are. You're trying to make me think you can hurt me." He put his hand over my wrist, pinning it to the table. "Do you think you can hurt me, Trav?"

I pushed up against his arm, but it didn't budge. "If you don't leave me alone—I'm going to hurt you. That's the only thing I can promise." I stared into his eyes and made my voice as low as I could. "I have a temper, Cody. And it's ugly."

"First, I still don't believe you, and second, you think I've never taken a punch before?"

"That's not what I'm talking about. Or—" I ran my free hand through my hair. "It's not all I'm talking about."

He shrugged. "Some people need to be alone when they're mad. Some people need to cry. If you need to yell and hit things, that's not going to bother me."

"That's a disgusting thing to say. Neither of those things are okay. Ever." The pulse in my wrist throbbed under his thumb. "You think that's the kind of person I want to be?"

I tried not to think of the things I'd said to my mother the night she'd overdosed. I tried not to think of the things I'd said to my sister. I tried not to think of every horrible thing that'd ever come out of my mouth when I lost control of the ugly mess inside of me.

"I think…" He slid his hand up my arm, drawing goosebumps from every hair he touched. "That at some point in your life, someone was supposed to protect you and they didn't. Maybe something inside you got broken." His hand reached my shoulder, and then my neck. "And that makes me want to protect you. I want to fix whatever's broken inside of you."

I shoved his hand off me just as it reached my face. "If you can fix everything, then why'd you throw that plate in the trash? Why'd you throw my eggs in the trash? There are some things you can't fix."

"I don't like what you're saying."

"Well, I don't like anything you're saying either."

"I'm not going to let someone like you go to waste."

"I'm not going to let…" I covered my face with my hands. "Fuck. Just stop. Stop everything."

"If you wanted me to stop, you wouldn't be here." His voice washed over me, seeping into my skin as he pointed out what I'd already known, but wouldn't admit to myself.

"I never said I wanted you to stop." My own honesty scared me. I should've never gotten mixed up with a therapist. My breath pushed my chest up and down as I stared at the ground. "I said you *need* to stop."

"Here's what we're going to do." He tipped my chin up, forcing me to look into his eyes. "You're going to let me get close to you."

"N—"

He only needed to raise one finger to silence me. "And in exchange, I'll promise to leave you if you ever hurt me."

"You're acting like you don't believe that will happen."

"The thing is, Trav." He inched closer to me, forcing my knees to part as he filled the space between them. "I don't."

I squeezed my fist in my palm. My chest tightened. I wanted to push him away and I didn't want to at the same time. "Cody, I've hurt people. Badly. I've hurt people so bad they never got better—do you understand that?"

"I've already decided I'm going to keep you, so you won't change my mind." He slid his hand further up my cheek. "I'm willing to risk getting hurt."

"You're not the only one taking a risk." I pushed his palm away and pressed my hands against my temples. My shoulders fell forward. "I can't hurt anyone else. I can't."

"Relax." Cody put his arms around me, forcing my face against his chest. He still didn't believe me. He rubbed his hand up and down the small of my back and breathed softly in a way that made my own breath slow.

"I wanna get close to you. I wanna touch you," he said, as if he didn't realize he *was* touching me. "I just want to kiss you, Travis. Can I kiss you?"

"What?"

"That's all I'm asking for."

I looked up into his face, over his plush lips and the coarse hair covering the soft skin around them. Then I looked into his dark brown eyes. That's when I realized Cody wasn't as honest as I'd thought he was. He was asking for so much more than a kiss. Heat pulsed through my body. I swallowed, so aware of how my throat didn't hurt anymore—thanks to him.

"Yeah, you can kiss me." I swallowed again. My chest was still moving, but it didn't feel like any air was coming in. I felt lightheaded.

"Good." He pulled my face back into his chest and laid his cheek against the top of my head.

I couldn't relax as I inhaled his heat and musk. I fidgeted with the worn string on the knee of my jeans. "So… are you going to?"

"Not right now." He ran his hand down the back of my neck. "I just want to know that I can when I'm not able to hold myself back any longer."

Thunder rolled over the desperate music pouring out of the stereo. Finally, he put his lips to my hair, inhaled, and pulled away. I didn't know what I was feeling anymore.

"I'm only ever going to make you feel good."

"Those aren't the kinds of promises you can make." I shook my head, but part of me wanted to believe him. A big part of me.

He was about to open his mouth when his phone went off in a dramatic piano ringtone. He took it from his pocket, and looked at the screen. His eyebrows knit together. "Give me a second."

He walked out onto the covered deck and shut the door. One hand shielding his ear to keep out the noise of the rain while the other hand pressed the phone to his head. I couldn't see his expression in the dim light, but the muscles in his shoulders were stiff. He ran a hand through his hair. I could barely make out the murmur of his deep voice over the rain and the music as he paced across the deck. He stopped. His fist flew into the punching bag. A scowl pulled his lips down as he continued talking and punching the swinging sack. I imagined the sound of his knuckles as he hit the punching bag over and over. It seemed so out of character for his gentle hands to be able to ball into fists.

He turned abruptly. I looked away. The music came to an end as he opened the door. Rain drummed against the roof.

"I have to step out for a bit."

"Okay," I said. I felt a question on my lips, but I didn't really know what it was.

"Relax while I'm gone." He brushed rain drops from his face. "Take a bath."

"Do I stink again?" I pressed my arms to my sides.

"I just want you to start feeling good."

"That's a lot to ask for."

"Use my bathroom. Light some candles. Relax. I'll be back in an hour or… soon." He walked to the front door.

"Where are you going?" I finally asked. It wasn't any of my business and I regretted asking, but really I just didn't want him to leave.

"I just have to…" His hand paused on his jacket. "I have to meet with someone. I'll be back soon." He opened the front door and wind howled through the house. "Relax while I'm gone."

"I'll try." I swallowed.

"Atta boy." All the traces of his scowl disappeared as he looked at me before slamming the door on the storm.

Chapter Eight
When The Lights Go Out

Cody's tires crunched in the gravel as he drove away. I

couldn't shake the cold off me even after he'd shut the door. It should've been summer weather, but every day just seemed to get colder and nastier.

'*Can I kiss you?*'

My teeth chattered. I stepped out onto the deck, wrapping my arms around my body. I couldn't spot the chickens. I wondered where they went when it rained. I looked out at the dark trees, so aware of how much wilderness was around us. No one was coming out there to find me. It was just me and Cody alone in all that wild.

I pushed on Cody's punching bag and shivered some more in the rain. At least the sensation was a distraction from the mess boiling under my skin. I drew my fist back and let it collide with the punching bag. What was it like to be Cody? To feel so powerful, so in control of everything? I hit the punching bag again until I felt the skin scrape away from my knuckles. What was it like to just touch someone whenever you wanted to? To trust someone just because you wanted to? What was it like to be that blissfully naive?

thud thud thud

Hitting the punching bag didn't make me feel better. It just made something heavy sit in my gut. I turned back into the house and shut the door.

The ticking of the clock rose above the rain and the wind. It scratched under my skin. I wanted Cody to come back. Something felt unfinished between us, and I was realizing how badly I wanted to finish it. That thought made the mess of confusion writhe in my stomach.

It was later in the day than I'd thought. I still had no idea how long I'd been asleep, but it was almost nine in the evening. Maybe I'd been asleep for more than a day. I wasn't sure. Looking at the clock felt disorienting. My sense of time had been jarred for weeks. I'd been in a… fog...

I hit play on the stereo to drown out the sound of the clock. A soft piano piece drifted out of the speakers. I'd never liked music. Too emotional. Made me feel on edge. It was better than the sound of the clock, though.

My eyes ran over a huge wooden bookshelf next to the television. I pulled out a book, taking one look at the title, *Attachment Theory and Psych…* before pushing it back on the shelf. I definitely wasn't in the mood for heavy reading. Most of the books seemed to be of a similar nature. Figured.

I noticed a photo on the shelf, and I turned away, because I already felt like I was prying too much into a stranger's home. Cody was a stranger. I had to keep reminding myself that.

I heard Axel's voice in the back of my mind. '*You need to keep*

your nose in your own fucking business.'

It was the only time Axel had come close to the truth.

My feet led the way upstairs. It was only when I reached the door of Cody's bedroom that I realized I was doing as he'd instructed and taking a bath in the master bathroom. Cody never told me I had to do what he said, but there was always this subtle feeling that not listening to him wasn't an option.

Subtle.

That was the word that described Cody; subtly bossy; subtly kind; subtly in denial. It wasn't his subtlety that made me uneasy though, it was everything he left out in the open that had me shaking.

My feet prickled as I walked into Cody's bedroom. It was a boundary I shouldn't have crossed.

The room was orderly to the point of feeling sparse. There was another framed photo on the dresser. I heard Axel's warning again. I shouldn't've been looking at anything in there. But I couldn't resist. I had to see who Cody was keeping so close to his bed.

It looked like a photo of him with his parents, though the older man and woman in the photo both had light hair where Cody's was almost black. I could practically feel the love. They were sitting around a campfire. The woman leaned into Cody and the man had his arm around his waist. They all had the same crinkly eyed smile.

I took a step back. Cody was a stranger. I had no right to be going through his bedroom—even though—had our roles been reversed, he would have been sniffing into every corner of my bedroom. Cody had no idea that the things people keep hidden are hidden for a reason.

I couldn't help being drawn to the deep blue comforter on Cody's enormous bed; I couldn't help picturing him in it; me beside him. We weren't even doing anything sexual in my vision. Just laying quietly. Maybe sleeping, but maybe just laying together in peaceful silence.

I pressed my nails into my palms to distract me from the heat twisting in my gut. I didn't know how to make sense of what I was feeling, or whether I even wanted to make sense of it. I pictured us again, and this time his hands were on mine, pinning them to the bed, holding me so firmly and so carefully.

I breathed. In. Out. Harder. Faster. I couldn't calm myself down. I never could.

Fuck him. Fuck Cody and everything he wanted. Fuck everything I wanted. Fuck it all. I tore that fucking comforter from the bed and threw it to the ground where it tangled around my feet. I threw the alarm clock and phone across the room and grabbed the drawer from the nightstand. I jerked until it fell onto the floor, spilling

out condoms and lube. My face burned. My heart still pounded, but I was suddenly so aware of what I was doing and so fucking ashamed. I scooped everything back into the drawer, stopping as my fingers touched a long length of black silk. Hot breath left my chest. I shoved it all into the drawer and pushed it back into the nightstand.

I did what I could to smooth the comforter back over the bed, hoping that it looked as pristine as before I'd torn the room apart. I prayed that Cody wouldn't find out what I'd done, and at the same time, I wished he was there, so he could see for himself how I could lose control. I wanted to push away from him and pull him towards me all at once.

I shut myself in his bathroom. It was all glorious marble, plush towels, and expensive soaps. Dreary light pooled down from the skylight above the tub, reflecting off the huge glass shower. Most of Cody's home was sparse, and rustic, but this room was pure luxury. I didn't want to touch anything, but I couldn't resist. I ran my fingers over the towels, rubbed the silky soap between my hands. Made me realize another thing about Cody. He was sensual.

The skin started to peel away from my lip as I bit down on it. I was starting to piece together a vivid picture of who this bear-man was—and what he wanted from me.

The water gushed into the huge tub like a waterfall down a mountain, spilling into the basin and filling the room with steam. Two black candles sat on the ledge of the tub, three more on the vanity. I picked up the box of matches next to them remembering Cody telling me to light them. I chewed at the skin peeling from my lip as the warm glow of the candles washed over me. Something about their aura reminded me of Cody.

The water was too hot as I stepped into the tub. Felt good. The candles flickered, emanating a leafy-piney-dirtish smell. The water filled the empty space around me, stealing the coldness from my bones.

My shoulders dropped as I rubbed soap all over my body. I wasn't used to taking care of myself like this. I hated to admit that it felt good. This was what Cody had wanted, wasn't it? For me to feel good?

'*Can I kiss you?*'

My soapy hands stroked down my stomach, to my thighs, to the ache between them. I wondered if this was what he wanted, too.

My breath came faster and faster as I fisted my aching cock. All my confusion fell away as I stroked myself, giving in completely to what my body wanted. All I could picture were Cody's lips; and his hands; and his huge, warm body; and all the things he said that made me feel so good. All those little lies I loved to hear; *you're so sweet;*

you'd never hurt anyone; you're not a bad person.

My breath hitched as all my pressure begged for release. I thought of the silk in his bedside drawer. I thought of how he might use it on me. Tie me down and tell me what to do. The truth was… I wanted that. It made me feel so good to think of giving up control. A long moan rolled off my tongue as a crack of thunder rumbled. Lighting flashed in the skylight above the tub. I bucked my hips into my fist as I thought about his lips all over mine. I pictured them moving lower. Me, tied up, unable to resist any of his power.

"Cody…" His name escaped my lips on an exhale. I barely breathed it, but hearing it sent a current of electricity down my spine. I wanted to stop. I didn't want to give in, but Cody had already taken control.

Over the sound of my own heavy breathing, and the drumming of the rain on the roof, I heard tires crunching up the gravel drive. A car stopped. A door slammed. I dropped my hands into the water guiltily as footsteps thumped across the floor downstairs. The music became louder. Then the storm became louder too, drowning out all the sounds below.

I let out a shaky breath. My cock wouldn't stop throbbing for attention, but I just closed my eyes and tried not to think of Cody's lips, or his anything. I breathed. In. Out. I was losing control in a whole new way.

His footsteps moved through the house, up the stairs, drawing closer, closer—until my eyes snapped open as the bathroom door handle turned.

Chapter Nine
Coming Clean

"What are you doing?" I tried to hide my hardness with my hands, but I was completely naked and exposed.

"Just seeing if you wanted a drink." Cody held up a bottle of wine and two stemless glasses. "Didn't mean to freak you out."

"You don't knock?" My heart punched against my chest. I felt like I'd been caught somewhere I shouldn't have been.

"The door wasn't locked."

"Yes it was."

"Must be busted. Sorry." He shrugged, not seeming very apologetic. He'd probably shared dozens of locker rooms with other men. He probably thought this was totally normal. Or he failed to grasp the concept of privacy on every level imaginable. Or he was messing with me.

I realized how dark it had become. If it hadn't been for the

candles, we would've been in complete darkness. My pulse slowed just a bit, as I realized that Cody probably couldn't see how hard I still was under the water. My heart skipped a beat. Probably couldn't.

"Mind if I shower?" He stepped into the room and closed the door.

"I'll get out."

"Stay."

I swallowed. He set one of the glasses on the ledge next to the tub and filled it to rim. The wine looked black in the dim light. He poured himself a glass and set it next to the sink while he stripped down.

I closed my eyes, even though I got a sense that he wanted me to watch.

The shower turned on. I opened my eyes. The glass was fogged on both sides, so all I could see was the silhouette of Cody's bulk. The bottle of wine sat next to him on the marble bench inside the shower. He sipped from his glass, even as his hand slid up and down his body, stroking over all those muscles, lower and lower...

My own hands started to move down my skin. A hot exhale brushed my lips. Cody rubbed more soap between his palms and took a long drink of wine. He kept exploring his own body until his hand slid between his legs.

It was too dark and foggy to see his face. Was he looking at me? Could he see where my own hand was moving?

A low groan rumbled from his chest. His knees spread wider. His hips thrust up slowly.

I bit back a moan and squeezed my cock. I couldn't stop myself as I watched his hand move faster and faster. Another groan rose above the sound of the water; louder this time. My thighs trembled. I couldn't fight back the whimper that escaped my lips.

"Yeah…" Cody's murmur brought my heart to a stop. *Could he see me?* "That's it..." He took another long drink and set his glass down.

My heart started beating again; fast; hard; with the same rhythm of my palm pumping over my throbbing cock. My lips fell slack and my throat opened in a moan that I couldn't fight back.

"That's it." Cody let out a long groan and stood. He leaned forward, pressing one hand against the glass. Like he was trying to touch me. My breath caught watching his palm slide down the glass as his other hand moved in wet strokes, faster, faster. I couldn't see his face, just the fuzzy silhouette of him touching himself under the flow of water. His hand trembled against the glass, smearing away the fog as he thrust his hips into his fist. My eyes screwed shut so I couldn't see him anymore, but his deep voice still poured over me.

“Cum for me…”

My breath stuck in my chest and I felt like I was drowning. The sound of the rain drummed in my ears. Water splashed around me as I stroked faster, the hot pressure unbearable. Cody’s groans came out louder and louder. His last primal moan suffocated every other sound, completely enveloping me, as I spilled over the edge.

I felt so wrapped up in him, and he wasn’t even touching me, wasn’t even looking at me. I poured out all my hot, aching need into my hand as Cody completely dominated me with just his presence.

I sucked in a deep breath of air as the waves of pleasure subsided. My skin buzzed. My head swam. I felt tossed around and completely disoriented, unable to make sense of the feelings surfacing in me now that all that hot lust was satisfied—mostly satisfied.

Cody let his hand smear down the shower, leaving a clear trail where I could see through the fog; see his enormous body; all its tight muscle. It wasn’t his body that drove me over the edge, though—It was everything else about him that made me lose control.

My chest rose and fell in fast, hard breaths. What had I just done?

What had *we* just done?

The sound of rain filled the heavy silence between us. The intimacy of what we’d shared pressed down on me. Even separated by glass, I felt so close to Cody, so intensely close. I wanted to escape from it all, but I felt like he was keeping me there, refusing to let me leave.

He turned his back to me, squirting soap into his hands and massaging it through his hair. I watched him through the smear in the fog; watched the way the candlelight reflected off his wet muscles. He let out a low groaning sigh, like he was finally letting go of tension that had been building in him for days.

When he finally turned to me, I was aware of how cold my bath had grown.

“So why’d you go through my shit?” he asked.

My face burned. I slid down into the water as if I could hide under it. As if it were possible to hide from everything I’d done and everything that’d just happened.

“Sorry.”

“If I didn’t want you going through my shit. I wouldn’t have left you here alone.” He shut off the water, so we could hear the music playing downstairs. “I just want to know why you did it."

“I said I was sorry.”

“I said I didn’t care.” He stepped out of the shower in all his enormous glory. I had to swallow something back, but I wasn’t sure if it was a gasp or a moan.

"I wasn't trying to look at anything. I just… I lost my temper. I told you I would." I kept my gaze on my hands. Even in the dark, I couldn't look into his face—or anywhere else on his naked body.

"So you messed up my bed and knocked my phone onto the floor? Yeah, you're not freaking me out with this 'temper' of yours."

"I ripped your drawer out, too."

"I could tell. You busted it." Even without light, I could sense the warmth of his smile. It made something twist inside of me, because I felt he should be yelling at me. He should have been slamming doors and telling me what a childish piece of shit I was.

"I wasn't trying to look at your stuff," I said again quickly, then added, "I'm sorry."

He laughed and grabbed a towel from under the sink, wrapping it around his waist. He poured himself another drink and leaned against the vanity. "So tell me why."

"There is no why. Anger, violence, stupidity, none of it has any explanation. It's all just pointless."

"Hmm." He stared down at his glass before taking another drink. "I don't think that's true."

"Do you always get drunk during your therapy sessions?"

"Is that what this is?" He took another drink.

"Isn't it? Isn't that what this has been the whole time? You're trying to get into my head."

"I guess so." It was too dark to see his expression as he sipped his wine. "So talk to me."

I dipped my finger into the glass next to me and swirled it around. "You say that as if talking would change anything."

"Talking can help you understand things. That can change everything." The rain drummed so hard against the roof that it drowned him out. When he was able to speak again, he said, "So take a drink. Relax. Talk."

The rain slowed so I could hear the hum of music flowing up from downstairs again. Fingers tripped slowly across a piano in a way that sounded almost off-key. A violin joined in on the particularly off notes.

"I don't drink."

He sipped his own drink. "Why not?"

"Can't you guess? Or do you just want me to say it?"

"Say it."

"I don't drink, because I've seen what people are like when they drink."

The violin screeched over the piano.

"I think you've just known a lot of very broken people. I think that's tainted the way you see everything."

“Can we do this for real?” My lip felt so raw, but I couldn’t stop digging my teeth into it. “I mean, can you do the real therapist thing?”

“I can try.” He poured himself another glass.

“Do you ever hate people for the things they tell you? I mean, your patients, clients, whatever. Do you hate them?”

“I don’t really judge anyone. It’s not what I get paid to do.”

“I don’t think any of your clients have done anything as awful as I have.”

“You have no idea what my clients have done.”

“Sometimes it feels like I just want to… to take all the ugliness inside me and dump it all over everyone.”

“Then all we need to do is fix that ugliness inside of you.” He took a drink and let out a low sigh. “You don’t need to get lost in this weird maze of self-loathing. I think you’ve spent too much time there.”

Cody leaned off the vanity and took a step towards me. That intense intimacy pressed down on me. I had to make him stop.

“My mom is dead because of me.”

All I heard was the rain.

“I don’t think that’s true.” Cody sounded so certain that I almost believed him.

“I turned twenty-three in February.” I closed my eyes. Didn’t want to look at Cody. “My mom thought that was a good time to get drunk off her face and tell me she wished I’d never been born.” My words stumbled out of my mouth. “Said all I ever did was try to get in the way of her relationship and make her feel shitty about herself.”

“She never should’ve said those things.”

“No… but I never should’ve said the things I said either.”

“You got into a fight with your mom. That doesn’t make you a bad person.” There was that tone; the one that made me almost believe him.

“Told her she was the worst thing that ever happened to me.” I bit my lip so hard it seared with pain. “Screaming, so fucking ugly. I told her sometimes I wished I’d never been born either. Some days she made me wish she’d just fucking died instead of giving birth to me.”

“Trav—” He took another step towards me.

Lightning flashed through the room. A roll of thunder tore open the sky, and when it finally stopped, the music was gone.

“Power must have gone out.”

“So what’s your professional opinion?”

“Lighting probably knocked a tree onto the power line.”

“That’s—that’s not what I meant.” I chewed my lip. “Were you listening?” “

“Sorry.” He left his drink on the vanity and crouched down close to the tub. I wanted to hide all my naked skin as he turned the faucet on, heating up the bath with more warm water. Steam billowed between us.

“This is kind of a fucked-up therapy session, isn’t it?” I said as I caught his eyes wandering over me.

“Kind of.” He frowned. He grabbed a bar of soap and took things one step further into fucked-up-land as he began to slide the slick bar over my shoulders.

“Are you trying to fuck me?” I blurted.

“I don’t fuck.” He stroked up my neck and back down. “It’s not my thing.”

I was going to reply, but he cut me off.

“My professional opinion is that you’re impossibly sweet, and impossibly damaged at the same time.” He rubbed his thumbs into my soapy neck. “You don’t know what to do with all the hurt inside you. You don’t know how to make yourself feel better, and you think everything’s your fault.” He put his lips against my head as he continued massaging my neck. “But it’s not your fault.”

“I killed my mom, Cody.” I tensed against his hands stroking my wet skin. “She overdosed the night I yelled at her.” My voice choked, like a hand had gripped my throat and squeezed it shut. “I can never take that back.”

Cody paused for a minute before responding, “Your mom was an addict. You didn’t make her do anything. You’re not responsible for other people’s actions, and you need to start realizing that.”

“But I’m responsible for my own, aren’t I? Sometimes when I feel… when I feel… when I get so mad and boiling…I can’t control myself. I can’t control anything.” Sick shame rolled through my gut. Nothing made me feel like less of a man than when I lost control. “Cody, I’m afraid of losing control with you. With everyone. I haven’t gotten close to anyone in a long time, because I… I don’t trust myself.”

“You’re never going to have to get mad when you’re with me, so you don’t have to worry.”

“Don’t say that.” I looked up at the dark skylight. “You can’t make those promises.”

He put his mouth so close to my ear that I could feel his breath. The way it fell against my skin reminded me of the moans he’d released in the shower.

“All I can promise is I’m going to take care of you… like someone should’ve done a long time ago.”

“Can you really fix people like me?”

There was a pause where Cody’s hot breath brushed my cheek,

then he said, “I can help you feel better.”

“Is that true?” I chewed my lip, digging into the tender skin with my teeth.

“It’s true.” He stroked his thumb over my lip, leaving it there so I couldn’t bite it anymore. “I just want to see you feel good.”

His last words finally broke me. Cracked me open. I couldn’t keep him out anymore.

I leaned into him. I didn’t understand why he was still letting me stay after everything I’d told him. Maybe he was even more messed up than I was. Maybe he really was just a nice guy. Maybe he just wanted to fix everything.

He reached into the tub and splashed water down my neck, washing off all the soap. “C’mere.” He grabbed a dry towel and held it out to me, looking away as I stood and wrapped it around myself.

His body was so warm as he led me into his bedroom. He still had no grasp of personal boundaries, but I wasn’t sure if I cared anymore.

The light switch *clicked*, but the room was still dark.

“Right.” Cody guided me into his bed, and turned to the bathroom, coming back with a candle. He set it on the dresser across from the bed and dug through one of the drawers.

“These are nice. Put them on.” He tossed something at me before pulling out his own something and slipping it over his legs. He let his towel drop to the floor. Tight black boxers stretched across his ass.

I resisted the urge to chew my lip as I looked down at the silky black pajama pants he’d tossed into my lap. It was weird to put another guy’s pajamas on. It was even weirder to tell another guy to put your pajamas on. I felt weird. So weird. But I ignored every instinct that told me I should be backing away from Cody as he pushed towards me. I wanted to let him get close. I wanted to hold on to him for as long as he would let me stay. I slipped the silk fabric onto my body.

He knelt on the bed, still seeming to tower over me, even on his knees. The closer he got, the more I felt out of control, but I wasn’t losing it—I was handing it over—giving it to the man who promised he could handle me. I decided, for just one night, I would let myself believe his promises. All of them.

He wrapped his arms around me like that was the most natural thing in the world. I wondered how many people he’d brought into his bed… how many people he’d tied up with that black silk.

All the hair on my body stood on end as he pressed his chest against my back. I could feel the deep, comforting rise and fall of his breath. I was hyper-aware of every inch of my skin touching his. So

much skin. So much heat.

"C-can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

His openness only unnerved me even more. The fact that he felt he had nothing to hide made me even more conscious of all the ugly awful things he'd pulled out of me. His hand stroked over my nipple, and I couldn't resist anymore. "When you said… I mean, when I asked if you wanted to fuck me." My words came out all fast, and then all slow, and then all fast again. "And you said that wasn't your thing. What did you mean?"

I felt a low rumble from his chest. "I mean, if you're asking if I want to touch your body so soft and sensual that you can't remember anything except how good I make you feel, then the answer is yes. If you're asking me if I want to bend you over and put my dick inside you, then the answer is no." He turned me around so that I was facing him. "The truth is, Trav, I want to do so much more than fuck you."

My cock throbbed under the soft fabric of the pajamas he'd given me. I didn't know which part I was responding to. It all sounded so dirty, yet I'd never felt so clean in my life. I'd never felt so comfortable. Good fucking God, I'd never felt so warm as I did when he was beside me.

My heart pounded against my chest. "I want you to promise you'll fix me," I breathed.

His deep inhales and exhales filled the dark space between us.

"I promise," he murmured as he ran his hand up and down my back. I drifted further and further into sleep listening to him whisper in my ear, "I promise I'll make you feel good."

I felt his breath on my cheek, and then on my lips, his mouth drawing closer and closer to mine, and I heard myself murmur through the fog of sleep, "Don't kiss me… don't want you… to get sick."

Chapter Ten
I Think I'm Falling For You

Hot. So hot. Hot.

I drew up fast, panicked for one second, because I knew something wasn't right. I put my hands to my face, thinking my fever had returned. I looked down at Cody sleeping beside me. Oh yeah. That was the part that wasn't right.

I struggled to free myself from his huge arms. How did he sleep so soundly? I had woken up five times in the night. Everytime he breathed or sighed into my skin, it startled me awake. It didn't

completely bother me, though. Everytime he woke me up, I got to fall asleep next to him all over again.

I took a breath and inched away from him. I couldn't think with the warmth of his skin overpowering my brain.

I felt like I had the morning I'd woken up next to my ex-girlfriend after we'd had sex for the first time—except Cody and I hadn't had sex. We'd just shared *something*. Then he'd just held me in his arms all night until the closeness between us felt so intense that I almost couldn't handle it. Actually, I definitely couldn't handle it.

I straightened my pajama pants on my hips and tightened the drawstring. That thin fabric felt like the only thing separating me and Cody.

I lay down next to the heat of him, and all those nagging feelings melted away. I always felt better with him. Even when he was sleeping he was regulating my feelings, turning them into whatever he wanted them to be. The smell of his sleeping body made my heart speed up. It was still clean, but there was that bit of sweat and heat.

He didn't open his eyes, but his arm wrapped around me and pulled me into his chest. He was still breathing heavily from sleep as he clutched me to him. My throat felt tight all over again. His warm lips pressed against my forehead. Electricity jolted down my spine. I didn't pull away, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to. I had no idea what to do and I felt paralyzed. I just lay there, enjoying his warmth, control, and tenderness.

A sigh left his lips and his eyelashes twitched. "I was dreaming I was a robot," he murmured with his eyes still closed.

"I don't think that's what you were dreaming about…" I could feel the hardness between his thighs.

"You were there, too." His eyes opened slowly and a growl rose from his chest, vibrating through my entire body. He inhaled against my head and murmured, "Did you sleep okay?"

Rain pattered on the roof.

"I woke up a couple times." I looked away from his face, because I couldn't take the look in his eyes. The intimacy of the moment was so intense, it was painful.

Cody slid his hands up and down my naked back, drawing goosebumps over my spine. His hands slid lower, grazing the waistband of my borrowed pants. My breath stuck in my chest as I felt his hardness push against my thigh. I couldn't look down, and I couldn't look up either. I just stared at the hair on his huge chest, wondering what it would feel like if I grazed my finger over it. Or my lips.

"Do you want me to stop touching you?" he breathed into my ear.

I bit my lip, shook my head, barely. I was thinking about his lips, and when the moment would come when he couldn't hold back from kissing me.

"I want you to touch yourself," he murmured.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean." He pulled at my drawstring and the knot came apart. "Will you touch yourself for me? Like you did last night?"

Was that what I'd done the night before? Had I been doing it for him?

Of course I had.

I shifted my thighs as the pressure between them became unbearable. My cock pushed against the silk fabric. I remembered the lengths of silk in Cody's nightstand. I chewed my lip, closed my eyes, tried to make sense of what I was feeling.

"Unless you're ready to get closer to me," he breathed against my neck. He slid his fingers around to the front of my waistband and rolled it down, just barely an inch. "Unless you want to go further."

"I'm not ready," I said without thinking about it. The *pat pat pat* of rain on the roof matched my racing heartbeat.

Cody drew his hands away from me, and the loss I felt was indescribable. He propped one hand under his head, and put the other one to the huge bulge in his boxers.

"I can wait." His eyes crinkled. His fingers tightened around his hardness and gave it the tiniest stroke. My own cock twitched in response.

"Sorry if I made you feel pressured in any way," he said, but his hand didn't stop stroking. "I just really… really want to get close to you." He licked his his lips, not in the nervous way that I did, but in a completely sensual way, like he was enjoying the feeling of his own body. His head fell back. His mouth fell open and his hand finally stopped.

I was a mess of pouring sweat, and pounding pulse, and uncontrolled breathing.

"I'm not going to push you into anything, Trav." He stroked his hand down my hair. "I'm just going to let you open up on you own time."

That was a goddamned lie. He was pushing me, pulling me, forcing me to want him. I pressed my lips closed, feeling the rawness where I'd chewed off the skin. Cody's hand moved lower, following the curve of my neck, my shoulder. I couldn't focus on my feelings anymore. The throbbing pressure was too demanding.

I slid my hand down my body, feeling the shivering goose bumps, savouring my own skin the way Cody would've savoured his. I

licked my stinging lip.

"Oh, yeah, that's it. Show me all your sweet skin." His chocolate brown eyes melted as he watched me slide the silk pants down my thighs.

I gave him everything he asked for.

I somehow found my breath as my fingers stroked my hard length. This was nothing like the night before. Cody was right next to me. He could touch me however he wanted. There was nothing separating us anymore.

Neither of us was hiding in the dark as he leaned over me and gazed into my face, letting his eyes wander down my skin as I stroked myself slowly, nervously.

"Oh yeah, that's it." His voice was a purr. He licked his lips. "Make yourself feel so good for me."

His voice took over me, controlled me, made it so easy to do what he wanted. He moved over top of my body, so that his arms and legs formed a cage around me, but he still wasn't touching me.

"Just like that."

His words were tender fingers stroking me. My own hand moved faster, squeezed tighter. My chest heaved. I wanted him to touch me. I wanted to feel his hands on my body. But I didn't know how to ask for it without things going too far. I ached to submit to his control, but I was so afraid I wouldn't be able to take it back. It felt like one word was all that stood between him taking whatever he wanted from me.

"I wanna see how fucking amazing you can feel."

His breath brushed my lips. My back arched. I wanted him to touch me. I was afraid of him touching me. Taking all my control. I focused on his breath falling softly on my cheeks as I stroked myself harder, faster. I closed my eyes as it all became too much and I spilled over the edge. Gushes of hot liquid poured into my hand and all over my chest. Cody was saying something, but I wasn't listening to the words. I was just feeling the soft rumble of his voice spill over me as I writhed beneath him. I wanted him to stop holding back. I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted him to drag his teeth across my lips and dive his tongue into my mouth.

"That's it…"

I opened my eyes to see him staring down at me like he was going to eat me. He dragged one finger through the liquid glistening on my abdomen, and brought it to his lips.

"Mmm, that's what I wanted from you." He sucked my cum from his finger. "I wanted to see how good you could feel." He ran his finger through the mess on my stomach again, sending shivers through my skin. "You looked like you felt *really* good."

“You make me feel good.” I blinked up at him.

“I know I do.”

I was about to reach for a tissue from the nightstand to wipe the mess from my stomach when Cody grabbed my wrists, pinned them above my head, and put his lips to my skin.

“Let me clean that up for you…” He ran his lips through the glistening liquid, licking the cum from my skin. I arched my back as his coarse hair and soft lips sent contrasting sensations throbbing through me. His tongue darted into my navel, stretching it open as he moaned his satisfaction. He brought one of my hands to his mouth and sucked my fingers clean. The feeling of his lips against the tender skin, his warm tongue swirling in circles, the brush of his beard, made everything inside me disappear. He opened his eyes slowly from behind his thick, dark lashes.

“You’re fucking delicious...”

That feeling of vulnerability intensified. For one second, he looked at me with an expression so starving, I wanted to shrink away from it—he looked like he was about to completely devour me. His eyes trailed up and down my body. The stiffness in his boxers twitched. My breath caught. A growl rose in his throat, and his hand tensed on my wrist, before suddenly releasing it.

The intensity in his eyes faded as he stroked a tissue over the sticky mess still left on my skin. “I’m not going to make you do anything you’re not ready for.”

He was lying. Did he know he was lying?

His boxers stretched over his taught muscles as he stood. I covered my face with my hands, smelling my own salty musk on them. I didn’t know what to do with him, or myself.

He disappeared into the bathroom. Closed the door. The shower turned on. I wondered what he was doing, but I didn’t have to wonder very hard. My mind filled with the image of his huge body under the stream of water the night before. Of his moans. Was that how bad he wanted me? He had to lock himself up like a wild animal to keep from tearing me apart? The thin glass of the shower felt like such a fragile cage.

He was completely naked when he came back out. His height nearly filled the doorframe. I swallowed back whatever was trying to crawl up my throat and looked away as Cody dug through his drawer for clean clothes.

“I’ll make breakfast.” He rubbed his temple, frowning for a second, but his grin returned almost instantly. “You just stay there and keep feeling good.”

I showered, because I was becoming paranoid of smelling bad in front of Cody. When I went downstairs, he was spreading peanut

butter over two slices of bread. He'd set my antibiotics on the table, and even went so far as to get a pill out for me to take. I popped it in my mouth as he sat down.

"Power's still out." He bit into one of the slices of bread and slid the other plate across the table. "I made a call. Said they'll have it fixed this afternoon, but that's probably a lie. Takes them forever to get out here."

The bread and peanut butter stuck in my throat as I swallowed. Cody was eating his oddly, swallowing slowly.

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked as he started rubbing his temples again.

"Just fine." He winked, bit into his bread, swallowed, curled down his lips.

"I got you sick."

He stood and snatched the empty plate from under me. "Have you ever picked morels before?"

"What's a morel?"

"Let's go outside." He dropped the dishes loudly in the sink. "I'm sick of being indoors. It's giving me a headache."

"Are you sure?" I tried not to bite my lip, and then I tried not to bite my nails, or, rather, I tried not to bite the sore, chewed up skin where my fingernails should've been.

He walked to the door, grabbed his coat, then stopped for a second. "You don't have a coat, do you?"

"It doesn't matter…" I started.

"Put this on." He tossed his to me.

"Maybe we shouldn't go out. You don't look so good."

"You're saying I don't look good?" His eyes crinkled.

I shook my head, because my tongue felt too heavy to talk.

"Put the coat on. Don't want you getting sick again."

He put on a plaid jacket. I slid my arms into the way too big leather coat. The scent that hit me from the jacket made my balls pull up tight to my body.

"God, you look cute in that." Cody looked like he wanted to eat me again.

I made my tongue move enough to stutter out, "Uh, thanks."

I'd never been pursued by a man before. Was this what it was always like? Something made me want to say no.

"C'mon." He laughed as he crossed to the backdoor with his boots on. "Nothing to do in the house with the power out. Can't even mess around in the garage." He stopped on the porch and rubbed his temples again. I wondered if he was thinking clearly.

"Maybe we should take it easy…" I eyed the woods. "Is it even safe to wander out there? Are there bears in this area?"

"Of course there are." Cody laughed.

"And you just go wandering out there without a gun or anything?"

Cody eyed me. "You're scared to eat a cow's friend, but you'd shoot a bear?"

"I wouldn't kill it." I flushed. "I'd just scare it off with the gun. Bears hate loud noises, right?"

"Nah. People think that, but not much scares animals once they get used to humans. A bear 'round here's more likely to come running at the sound of gunfire, 'cause he'll think someone's made a kill he can steal off with." Cody must've noticed my look of fear, because he laughed. "Bears have better shit to do than fuck with humans. You've got nothing to be afraid of… unless we see a cub."

"It's the baby bears you have to worry about?"

"Where there's a baby—there's a momma—and you *never* make a mother feel her cub is threatened."

A sharp pang hit me, and I had a sudden and bizarre wish that people were more like animals.

I tried to open my mouth to protest again, but Cody threw his heavy arm around my shoulder and that was the end of the discussion. The wet grass *squished* under our feet, but the rain was more like a falling mist than a downpour. My canvas shoes weren't made for hiking like Cody's bulky boots. Rain seeped through them, wetting my socks as we walked through the mess of wild trees.

An egg crunched under my shoe, startling me and making me focus on where I was stepping. The chickens flowed around our ankles, and followed us for a bit until the trees became thick, and they all stopped, scratching at the dirt.

I could see why Cody had wanted to get out of the house. Even with all the wetness, there was something invigorating about the piney air and the hardness of the earth under our feet.

"Are we just wandering aimlessly?" I asked as I looked back to see the cabin had long since disappeared.

"You mean you haven't been looking for morels?" He laughed.

"I still don't know what that is." I ducked as a branch almost struck me in the face.

"Here." Cody dropped into a squat at the base of a tree. When he rose again, he was holding the strangest thing I'd ever seen. "You've really never picked them before?"

He grabbed my wrist and put the rubbery thing in my open palm. I wanted to shake it off, but his grip wouldn't let me. Maybe it was a type of alien mushroom, but it looked more like a sponge. It was tube-shaped with big holes in it and a thick stem that was covered in dirt.

"Can't you die from eating random shit in the forest?"

"Not if you know what you're doing." He tucked the thing into his pocket and gave me one of those winks that made my head light. "I have some steak we can cook them up with." He paused, then frowned. "Right. You don't eat meat. You'll have yours with eggs."

I didn't tell him how good the steak sounded, even if it was a dead animal covered in poisonous sponges he dug out of the forest.

Cody reminded me of a dog as he walked briskly ahead of me, stopping every now and then to pick another sponge, like he was an animal sniffing out food. Actually, he wasn't so much like a dog as he was like a bear, huge and hulking. He walked through the wilderness like it was his home.

The ground hit an incline. Huge sheets of rock jutted out of the earth in a steep, broken surface that was twice my height, but Cody just kept pushing forward—right up. My feet slipped over mossy rock as I grabbed at whatever I could to pull myself up. Cody reached the plateau and stuck his arm out to me, pulling me into his body. He smelled even better in the wet wild, like it was amplifying everything strong and musky about him.

I'd completely forgotten he'd been lying about being sick until he rubbed his temples again. He was so skilled at making me forget.

"You said you would feel better when we got outside."

"I thought I would." He laughed just a bit, but sank down on an enormous tree trunk. The earthy smell of rot drifted from it as it sank in under his weight.

"I got you sick." My stomach twisted into knots. After everything Cody had done for me, I'd repaid him by making him sick.

"Nah." He grabbed me by the waist and pulled me into his lap. The dilapidated tree-trunk sank even more. "How could you have gotten me sick? I haven't even kissed you yet."

Yet. He was still going to. I didn't really want to wait. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to throw away all my fear and hesitation and just embrace what he was trying not to force on me. His hands stroked up and down my back, over my shoulders, wherever they wanted to. Cody thought he was holding back, but he really wasn't. He had no idea how demanding his touch was.

I looked at his lips, then looked away. I stood quickly. "Hey, I found one of your sponge things."

The moss slipped from the jagged rocks under my feet as I walked carefully to where the incline dropped off sharply. It wasn't a high fall, but it was steep, and didn't look fun.

Something moved in the trees behind me.

"Just a goat." Cody laughed at the way I froze.

I didn't trust him until I heard another rustle followed by a

baahhahaa.

He rubbed his temples again as I stooped to pick one of the sponges he was collecting.

"Hold up." He hurried over to me just as I broke the stem off in my fingers. "That's not a morel. It's a brain mushroom. See how they look different?" He held one of his sponges next to the one I'd found.

"Not really."

"It's poisonous." He swatted my hand and the brain mushroom bounced out of my fingers, down the incline. "Deadly poisonous."

"Jesus." I wiped my hands on my pants and stood up quickly. "Why are you looking for something so dangerous?"

"It's not dangerous if you know what you're doing."

"Do you know what you're do—"

"Fuck, look out!" Cody rushed in front of me as a white blur darted out from the trees. It crashed into his knees, knocking him backwards. His boots slipped on the wet rocks, unable to find footing. His huge frame barely missed me as he fell backwards, and kept falling, as he followed the deadly poisonous mushroom down the incline.

Chapter Eleven
The Unexpected Ways You Could Die
Or
We Know This Can't End Well

The goat stared down at me with its devil's eyes. My heart pounded so hard that I could barely see. Barely think. Black dots filled the corner of my vision as I clamoured to Cody. My hands gripped rocks and earth as I looked down at his limp body laying in the soggy dirt. I slipped a few feet from the ground and fell into the mud. My breath was desperate gasps as I stumbled towards Cody.

He was lay face down, not moving. *Was he dead? He was dead. Oh God, I'd killed him.* My breath caught. *Was he dead?* My mind wouldn't stop asking that incessant question. I was in a dream. A nightmare. This couldn't be happening again...

Finally his chest heaved up and down. Relief crashed through me so hard that I fell to my knees beside him.

"Oh God." I put my hands on his shoulders and resisted the urge to collapse into his body. "Oh, God, I'm sorry."

He let out a pained growl, but didn't move.

"Are you okay?" It was a stupid question. My voice was almost

a sob. I tried to steady my hands, tried not to let terror overwhelm me. I had to keep it the fuck together. “Tell me you’re okay,” I pleaded.

Cody lifted his head, his response a slow, groaned, “Fuuuck.” He rubbed his his palm against his forehead and it came away bloody. “I should have eaten that fucking goat.”

I stared in horror.

“Kidding,” he said quickly.

“Not what I meant.” I pulled my sweatshirt over my hand and held it to his forehead where a split in his skin was oozing blood.

“Oh, fuck, it’s not a big deal.” He gently moved my hand and held onto it. “Even a tiny cut on the skull will bleed like a slit throat. Don’t freak out.”

“I can’t help it.” I couldn’t feel my lips as I spoke. My eyes fixed on the bright red stream of blood pouring down his face. I’d hurt him. I’d nearly killed him. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I should have been paying attention.”

“C’mere.” He pulled me into his lap and wrapped his arms around me, like I was the one who’d just fallen down a pile of rocks, like I was the one who needed to be taken care of.

“Are you okay?” My hands shook. I couldn’t really even hear my own voice. I just kept picturing Cody’s face as he’d fallen. His body lying in the mud. “Tell me you’re going to be okay.”

He put his cheek to mine. I felt the smear of his blood as he said, “I’m okay.”

I spotted the deadly brain mushroom in the mud next to us. It still looked like the sponges Cody wanted to eat.

“Let’s head back.” He wiped blood from his face.

I nodded. He was okay. He’d promised. So why wouldn’t my hands to stop shaking?

He stood slowly, his footing slipping just a bit in the mud. He was a filthy mess of dirt and blood. He patted his pocket and gave me a weak smile. “Mushrooms are still okay.”

I pressed my sleeve against the gash in his forehead. “Is there something I should be doing? First aid? Something?”

“I’m fine.” He put his arm around me, applying just a little too much weight to my shoulders. “Been through a lot worse.”

“Please don’t tell me that.” A twig scratched across my face as we moved through the trees. The house felt so far away. I prayed that Cody remembered the way back. If he’d been hurt worse… What could I have done to help? What good was I to someone like him?

“I told you my mom was a park warden in Alaska, right?”

“No, you never told me that.”

“I grew up climbing mountains. Not the first time I’ve taken a

spill."

I tried to protest, but he cut me off. "My parents took a year off work when I was in eighth grade, and we just spent the year camping everywhere, seeing everything."

That image made something ugly sit in my gut. Eighth grade was the year my mom finally left Axel… the year we spent three weeks in a shelter… the year she went back to him... left him again… the year she stopped hiding her drinking… the year she stopped hiding a lot of things.

"That sounds amazing," I said, because I didn't know what else to say.

He put his arm around me, and I thought it was to comfort me. I thought he'd read my mind, and was about to kiss me. Finally, I realized he was just steadying himself, and then it hit me that he'd been telling me all that because he was trying to distract me—and for a second it had worked.

"Are you okay?"

He pressed his eyes closed, and winced as he shook his head. "Don't worry about it. I don't want you to…" He winced again. "Worry."

His whole huge bulk went down, crushing me, pinning me to the earth. A root jabbed into my spine. My lungs could barely draw breath with Cody limp on top of me.

"Oh, God, Cody." I shook his shoulder. He just groaned. I touched the drying cut on his forehead. His face was burning hot. My guilt sucked me down into the earth. "You promised you were okay. Why didn't you just tell me you were sick?"

He shook his head limply.

Thunder rolled in the distance. A rustle shivered through the brush, followed by a low, *clip clop, clip clop* and a louder, *baaahhhaahh*...

I closed my eyes, listened to the thumping of my own heart, let myself take some calm breaths. I'd survived worse.

I dug for Cody's phone in his pocket. He groaned from on top of me. "What're you doing?"

"I'm calling an ambulance. You're sick, battered, maybe concussed… and you say *I* can't take care of myself."

He chuckled groggily as he pushed up off me. He put his hand to his head, smearing dirt all over the cut. "Let's just get away from these fucking goats. They get extra pissy when it rains. The house isn't far."

He squared his shoulders, but his legs wobbled as soon as he took a step.

"What are you doing?" I grabbed his shoulder. "What are you

trying to do? You're freaking me out."

"Huh, that's funny." His brows pressed together under all that blood and dirt. "That's the opposite of what I was going for."

"So that's what you do?" I rubbed my eyes. "You pretend things aren't a big deal, even though they are?"

"I'd never put it that way. Let's say, I don't freak out about things I think I can handle."

"I'm starting to think you can't handle as much as you think you can."

"I'm still standing, aren't I?" He grinned and took my hand in his.

"You need to go to a hospital." I put my arm around him. My knees buckled as he shouldered some of his enormous weight onto me, but I tried not to show it. Rain spit down through the thick branches overhead.

"Okay." He exhaled a sigh that sounded like relief.

I hadn't expected it to be that easy. Sometimes being around Cody was like climbing up the slick rocks. I'd put my foot down, expecting resistance, and it would just give way. Except the only difference was that instead of plummeting to my death, I just kept falling into him… deeper and deeper….

Chapter Twelve
Time To Get Our Heads Checked

My heart still pounded after struggling through the trees for a half-hour and driving forty minutes to the hospital, but Cody looked completely relaxed as he sat on the bed listening to the doctor's instructions. He hadn't been shaken to the core like I had.

I started to wonder if maybe his attitude towards life came from just being too fucking lucky all the time. It's easy to take risks if you've never faced consequences. He'd lived in a beautiful dream his whole life and had no idea how horrible the world could be. Part of me wanted to yell at him, and the other part wanted to curl up in the dream with him.

He only had a couple butterfly stitches on his forehead, and a prescription for antibiotics to tell him how much he'd risked. Somehow, I didn't think they were speaking loud enough. I bit my tongue, because I didn't want to yell at him. I didn't want to say anything that would damage him and make him keep his promise to leave me the instant I tried to hurt him. I didn't want to be the one to force him to wake up.

"Cheer up." He put a huge hand on my shoulder and shook it lightly as the doctor left the room. "I told you I don't want you worrying about me."

"One of us has to worry."

"Well, then let me do it." He forced the corners of his lips down, but his eyes were still bright. "See how worried I am?"

I cracked up. I wanted to be pissed at him, but he had a completely effortless control that had grabbed me from the moment I'd met him.

"You like milkshakes? Let's get some. My throat kills." He rubbed his hand over his adam's apple and swallowed.

"I warned you about that."

"You warned me not to kiss you." He winked, biting back his grin. "And see all the good listening to you did me?"

"I told you to stay away from me."

"Well, I'm not gonna do that." He threw his arm around me as he stood from the bed. "I was never gonna do that."

He pushed me through the door without paying attention to the wheelchair that was barrelling down the hallway. My knees crumpled with pain as the man in the chair went spilling out onto the floor.

"Jesus fucking Christ watch where you're fucking going you goddamned jackass."

"I'm so sorry." I grabbed the man by the elbow and tried to help him back into the chair, but he pushed me away and rose shakily. He seemed light-headed, and rail thin. I'd met enough junkies in my life to know that he was one.

"I'm sorry," I said again as I noticed a raw scrape on his elbow just below the hospital gown, though judging by his hollow cheeks and marked up skin, it was the least of his concerns.

"Just look where you're—" He stopped, looking at Cody, before his shaky gaze focused back on me. "Fucking piece of shit."

"Watch it," I warned.

"You." He covered his eyes, like the light was burning into them. "You beat the fucking shit out of me."

"I barely touched you." I took a step back, because I realized he was out of his mind. Either on drugs, or just permanently fucked.

"You here to take more money from me? Fucking piece of garbage." He lurched forward, and I realized he was trying to attack Cody, but he just stumbled forward. "I'll tear your fucking throat out this time."

My jaw twitched. My fists clenched. I itched to do something I'd regret until Cody put his hands on my shoulders.

"No one's trying to take any money from you." Cody sounded

so calm in contrast to me and the other guy.

"You don't know what gang I run with, fuckwad." The guy stood from the wheelchair and grabbed for Cody's shirt, but missed and stumbled forward. "We'll fucking kill you."

His grimy hand grabbed hold of Cody's elbow. Prickling heat tore through me. I jerked away from Cody, thrust my palm into the guy's bony chest, and shoved him hard.

"Look, buddy, I don't know what kind of shit you're on, but you need to take a fucking step back." I stepped between him and Cody. "If you touch him again, I'll split your head open." The volume in my body was way up; pounding heart; gushing breath; pulsing adrenaline. I couldn't turn it down.

The junky looked me up and down, taking in my bashed-up face, and looked past me to Cody. "You beat the shit out of this kid too, you sick fuck?" He spat a nasty glob that fell short of Cody and splattered on the floor. His hands spun the wheels of the chair, jerking it forward like the gesture was supposed to be intimidating. "You're gonna wish you never fucked with the Skull Band."

Skull Band. The name surged from my memory like a knife slicing up my gut. That was the garbage Axel crawled around with.

Was that why he was talking about stolen money? My heart beat faster. Did he recognize me? I pulled up the hood of my sweatshirt to cover my tattoo.

He reached out again and I kicked the front of the chair, pushing him away. "You better back. The fuck. Away."

"Relax." Cody stepped between the two of us. His tone was completely unruffled, his movements slow. "We should get out of here." He looked at the junky, and spoke like he was talking to a kid throwing a tantrum; firm, but comforting. "No one's trying to hurt you or take anything from you. Just relax."

"You're a fucking liar." The guy jerked forward, and Cody moved back just fast enough to avoid being grabbed by the throat. Blood pulsed in my ears.

Everything in me screamed to tear the guy to pieces, but Cody put his hand over my balled fist. That was all he needed to keep me still. What was I doing? I unclenched my knuckles. A nurse turned the corner in a brisk walk, flanked by two security guards.

Cody looked at the staff approaching and pulled me quickly in the direction of the exit, shouting over his shoulder, "Sorry I couldn't scare some sense into you."

Curses echoed through the hall as the junky fought with the staff trying to calm him down. I wanted to run back and throttle the guy. And that terrified me.

I still shook as we rounded the corner. I was so stupid. So

stupid. What if he'd recognized me? What if he'd gone back to Axel and told him...

"Hey, calm down." Cody took my hand in his and kissed the back of it. Something in me relaxed, like a knot slipping open.

He had this weird confidence that everything would always turn out okay. And his confidence was contagious. When he was touching me, holding me, the threat of everything became muted.

"It just scares me." My voice grew a little steadier. "I hate that type of person."

He squeezed my hand. "He's got his own issues. Those are the kind of people who need help."

He didn't know what the Skull Band was, and I didn't tell him. He didn't need to know about people like Axel, or the way they laughed about breaking legs, ruining lives. Cody didn't need to know that guys like that were proud of how easily they could destroy a person. Cody probably would've thought he could fix those guys.

Something clicked.

"Did you…" My brows scrunched together. My question sounded weird, even to me. There was just something about the exchange that made me think... "Did you know that guy?"

"I talked to him a couple months ago." Cody brushed his hand over his nose. "He owed a friend some money, so I did some mediation between them. Honestly, I was hoping I could help knock some sense into him. Hate seeing people killing themselves."

"You don't know what people like that have done." I pressed my lips together. "What they're capable of doing."

I'd had this image of Cody meeting in a quiet office with people who calmly discussed their issues with him in a civilized manner. I was starting to see that the people he worked with were a lot more, well... like me. Maybe he had more insight into reality than I'd thought.

"I probably shouldn't talk to you about my work… you know." He itched his nose again. "Client confidentiality, or whatever."

"Right… I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked." I scraped my lip with my teeth. "Will you try to pick your clients more carefully? Especially if you're going to run into them all over town. I know you think you're a tough guy, but some people are *dangerous*."

"Yeah, I've been taking on too much work around here." He picked at the butterfly stitches in his forehead. "Town's feeling smaller and smaller." He looked at me, dropping his hand as his serious expression melted under the warmth of his smile. "That was adorable, by the way."

"What was adorable?" I pushed the door open and blinked in the sunshine.

“How protective you were of me.” His eyes crinkled as he grinned and it made my whole face hot, and then it made my whole body hot.

“I just… you hit your head… and you’re sick and… I know what that kind of person can be like…I didn’t want you... ”

A chuckle poured out of his chest as he watched me stammer, and I couldn’t stop myself. The volume in my body pounded again. I cut off his stupid laugh with my lips.

His huge, warm hands wrapped around me, pressing into the small of my back as the scent of his body overwhelmed me, and his lips slid over mine. I couldn’t breathe. Then I couldn’t stop breathing. My chest shook with all the hot air pouring out of me as Cody kissed me, tenderly and powerfully all at once. His tongue passed over my lips and they opened for him. Nothing I’d ever experienced came close to the amazing sensation of him. Just him. His kiss was giving; demanding; sweet; raw. His lips were cold water on a searing burn.

“Oh, God, I’ve wanted to kiss you from the moment I saw you.” His groan seeped into my skin, right down to my bones. My lips followed his as they pulled away. He looked down at me, and I got my first glimpse of him in real, glowing sunshine. He was fucking gorgeous.

He grinned. “But as cute as you are when you’re acting possessive, I still told you not to worry about me.”

“I’ll try,” I said, struggling to pull myself out of the daze he’d thrown me into.

“Atta boy.” He put his hand on the small of my back as he led me through the parking lot to his SUV.

I was still dazed even after he’d stopped at a drugstore to pick up his prescription. I couldn’t stop feeling his lips on mine. I still felt the phantom of his kiss as he pulled through a drive-through and asked me what kind of milkshake I wanted. I paused, wondering if it was time to mention that dairy cows are kept in cramped barns their whole miserable lives, but Cody just went ahead and ordered for me, passing me something with fudge sauce and bits of cookie crumbled up in it. It was fucking delicious.

“Thanks,” I said, trying to pretend I didn’t know how much suffering happened to make this stupid dessert.

“My pleasure.” Cody’s grin made my insides all hot no matter how much ice cream I shoveled into my stomach. My lips tingled. I licked them, tasting the sweet stickiness of the ice cream.

We drove in silence for a long time. Cody drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, a dark, pensive look on his face.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

He looked over at me, slightly disoriented, like he’d been

pulled out of his thoughts. “Would you rather only be able to eat bananas for the rest of your life, or only be able to eat peanut butter for the rest of your life?”

“What the fuck?” I shook my head, wondering if I had heard him right, or if I was still stupefied from his kiss.

“It’s just a game.”

“What’s the point?”

“There is no point. It’s just fun.”

“Okay, well, then, bananas I guess.”

“Seriously?”

I shrugged. “What part of that was supposed to be fun?”

“Okay, here’s another one. Would you rather never be able to wear socks again, or never be able to wear shoes again?”

“Definitely never wear socks again. How is that even hard?”

“Yeah, I guess I didn’t think about that one very long.” He laughed. “You try one.”

“Okay.” I chewed my lip for a minute before answering. “Would you rather be attatched by the head to your twin, or absorb him into your body before birth?”

“Jesus, that’s dark.”

“Oh.”

His shocked expression turned into a grin. “I got a good one if you like dark.”

“Okay,” I said hesitantly.

“You’re in a room with a baby. Doesn’t matter how you know, but somehow, you know that this baby is Hitler. There’s a pillow lying next to the cradle, and you know you have just enough time to smother the baby. What do you do?”

“Holy fuck.”

“Right? So what do you do?”

“I’d take the baby.”

“That wasn’t supposed to be one of the options.”

“You didn’t say it was either or. I’d take the baby, and I’d love him, so he’d never grow up to be a hateful monster. He’s a baby. He hasn’t done anything wrong yet, and maybe he doesn’t have to.”

“You’re an interesting guy, Trav.” His eyes crinkled.

“What would you do?”

“Honestly…” Cody picked at his stitches again. “I was gonna say I’d kill the baby.”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe you would.”

“So, let’s say you raise this baby, and you give him all the love in the world, you give him your heart… and he still grows up to be a psychopath. He’s about to pass the point of no return and kill millions of innocent people. You have a gun pressed to his head. Do you pull

the trigger?"

"I guess so, but I don't really like the question."

"That's why they're hypothetical."

"I don't think that's why they're called hypothetical questions."

"Okay, what would you rather…" He licked his lips. "Fried or scrambled eggs?"

"Do they have poisonous mushrooms on them?"

"Maybe."

"Then I guess scrambled."

"Good answer."

Chapter Thirteen

We Need to be Asking Ourselves Some Real Questions.

"Looks like the stove's still not an option." Cody flicked a light switch uselessly.

"Are you sure you have the energy to cook dinner?"

"Why?" He winked. "You volunteering to cook for me? Talk about putting myself in danger."

I tried to hide how much that embarrassed me. Not being able to cook for myself made me feel so pathetic. I cleared my throat. "I think you need to lay down."

"How many times do I have to tell you I'm okay?" He smiled, but just with his lips. His eyes looked exhausted.

"Cody, please don't do this." I hesitated. "Don't tell me you're okay if it's not true."

He let out a long sigh and rubbed his forehead. "Guess I'm not as good at lying as I thought I was."

"I don't think you're good at lying at all." I couldn't resist letting the corner of my mouth quirk up.

"How about I lay down if you lay down with me?"

"Deal."

For a second, he looked like he was going to scoop me up in his arms and carry me upstairs. It was like he was so controlling that he couldn't even let people walk on their own. He clearly dismissed the thought quickly, and instead put his arm around my shoulders and led me up to his bedroom, before stripping down and collapsing onto the bed.

I got into bed beside him. It was strange to feel the way his huge muscles were completely drained of all their energy. I wrapped an arm around him, but he took my hand and held it to his chest. I looked up to the gash on his forehead, then looked away quickly. It

would definitely leave a scar.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked.

"Why would I be mad?"

"For everything."

"I'm never going to be mad at you," he said sleepily.

"Are you just pretending to be nice right now? Like you were doing with that junky at the hospital?"

"I wasn't pretending anything then, and I'm not pretending now."

"I think you're lying."

"You think I'm that good at lying?"

"No… I think you're good at changing the truth, making it better. You're a nice guy, Cody. Too nice."

A small grin spread across his tired face, then disappeared. "Would you believe that people used to call me an asshole every single day?"

"No."

"You wanna know what I used to do for a living?"

I nodded. For the first time, I realized how little I knew about him. His parents lived in Alaska; he'd spent a lot of time outdoors as a kid; he was a therapist; he loved classical music; he had a bad habit of dragging people and animals into his home; he was impossible to make angry; he never looked before he leapt; he thought he could fix anything.

"Up until last year, I worked for a collections agency."

My mouth fell open. Phone calls and threatening voicemails buzzed in my head—memories of all the harassment we used to get when I was a kid. I remembered the time my mom spent all night crying because a collections guy had called—pretending to be a cop—and said he was coming to haul her to prison, because our utility bills had gone to collections. It was bullshit. The knock on the door never came, but that's the kind of shit those people do.

"I don't believe you."

"Do you think I'd lie to you?"

"It just doesn't seem possible. You're not the kind of guy who could hurt people like that."

"I guess that's why I ended up quitting. I was spending more time getting to know people than shaking money out of them." He was quiet for a minute. I was tempted to say he was hesitant to continue, but I'd never known him to be hesitant about anything.

"One night, I was talking to a woman on the phone. I was trying to get her to pay three hundred dollars in phone bills, and she was just crying and crying, saying she didn't even have enough money to buy milk for her kids, because her ex hadn't paid child support."

I sucked in a breath. That story felt too familiar.

"So I told her to give me his address. I'd get the deadbeat to pay." He raked his teeth across his lip. "Does it bother you? That I did work that harassed people? Does it bother you that I might've hurt some people?"

"I guess you had to put yourself through school somehow." I looked down at his chest. "You'd never purposely hurt anyone."

"But if I did?"

"Is this another one of your hypothetical questions?"

"Let's say it is."

"I don't see the point in wasting energy answering questions that don't matter."

"I just want to know what you would think."

"You're being a therapist again, aren't you?" I stopped—suddenly realizing what he was doing. "You're trying to get me to say I'd forgive you for hurting people, so you can turn it around and tell me that I should forgive myself for all the things I've done."

"Would you, though?"

"Forgiveness has never really been one of my skills." I rubbed my neck.

He exhaled a shaky breath, looking suddenly so much more exhausted. "Maybe I can teach you a thing or two about it."

"So is this another session?" I asked.

"Do you want it to be?" His strong heartbeat *pulse pulse pulsed* against my hand on his chest.

I was quiet for a minute, watching as Cody resisted the sleep threatening to pull him under. Finally I answered, "I just want to know that you're not mad at me."

"I'll never be mad at you." His eyes closed. "Promise."

His body slowly went limp as his breathing slowed, but he still held my hand in his.

My chest felt like it was full of lead. I'd hurt him. Maybe he didn't realize it, but it was true. He wouldn't have gotten sick if it hadn't been for me. He wouldn't have fallen if I hadn't been careless.

And he wasn't even mad.

I put my fingers to his forehead and he flinched in his sleep. I drew my hand away quickly. If he realized I'd hurt him, would he make good on his promise to kick me out?

Something told me that he wouldn't.

I wasn't sure how that made me feel, but I knew it should've made me feel awful—the fact that I didn't made my guilt even heavier.

I was going to hurt Cody. I was going to hurt him like I'd hurt everyone. And he was going to let me.

But I still couldn't help loving his body next to mine; his hand on mine. As I dozed off next to him, I hoped he'd never let go.

I woke up when Cody stirred. His skin was so hot through the thin fabric of his t-shirt. I ran my hands over his shoulders. I didn't ask if he was okay, because I doubted he'd tell the truth.

"Do you need anything?" I brushed the hair from his face, feeling a pang of guilt at how clammy it was. I knew exactly how awful he felt right now. Why had he let me do this to him?

He didn't open his eyes. His voice was so slow and sleepy that I wasn't certain he was awake. "Could you get me a glass of water?"

"Yeah," I said quickly. "Whatever you need." I stopped at the edge of the bed, fidgeting nervously for one second, before putting my lips to his. "I'm gonna take care of you now," I whispered against the smile spreading across his face.

He didn't answer. Looking into his face made my heart pulse so fast it felt like a terrified bird beating its wings against my ribcage.

My stomach grumbled as I walked down to the kitchen and poured a glass of water. Cody was probably hungry too. I looked through his cupboards, but didn't find anything I knew what to do with. He wasn't the type of person to buy cereal.

I found a loaf of bread in the cupboard, but couldn't find the peanut butter he'd used that morning. It was always the basic things that made me feel useless. I pulled some deli meat from the fridge and closed the door quickly to keep the cold in. I'd experienced enough power shut offs to know how horrible the stench of spoiled food could be.

I layered the meat on the bread, trying not to think of how I was handling dead flesh. I didn't know what kind of animal it was; whether it would've had a best friend or not.

Hopefully the mustard I smeared on the sandwich would make it edible. I wished I could make him some kind of soup like he would've done for me if I were sick. His throat must've been killing him. I washed the dead animal feeling from my hands and grabbed another piece of bread for myself.

"Hey," I whispered as I pushed the bedroom door open. "I made you a sandwich." I set the glass of water down on the bedside table and kneeled on the bed, holding the plate out to him.

"You're so fucking sweet." A smile crept across his lips. Even with his eyes closed, I could feel their warmth like sunshine. My heart tripped on its beat, because I was the reason he was smiling.

"It's uh, it's actually just bread with pieces of meat on it." I bit into my own bread. Anything tastes fine when you're hungry.

He took a bite and winced as he swallowed. He set the sandwich back on the plate and fell into the pillow. "Delicious."

It wasn't true. But it made something soft spread through me. Maybe he wasn't lying. Maybe it really was good.

I handed him the glass of water, and one of the pills from his bottle on the nightstand.

"Thanks." He sat up again long enough to swallow a pill and drain the glass, looking exhausted as he lay back down.

I set the plate on the nightstand and curled in next to him. "Can I get you anything else?"

He shook his head. "Just be here with me."

"I can do that." I pressed my face into his neck. The bird stuck inside my chest flapped wildly. This was all he wanted? After everything he'd done for me, he just wanted me to repay him by being with him? I could do that.

I could do that for as long as he wanted.

Chapter Fourteen
We're Still In The Dark

I spent an entire day wrapped in Cody's arms, doing what I could to make him feel better. By the next morning, he was restless, and it was a struggle to force him to take it easy. For a guy who liked giving orders, Cody wasn't good at taking them. I suggested we watch a movie, but when we stumbled downstairs, we found that no one had come to fix the power.

"I have some books on the shelf," he said from the couch. He still looked pale and clammy.

"Are you asking me to read to you?" I teased, but I couldn't help smiling.

I walked to the huge wooden shelf next to the television. Cody certainly had a lot of interests. Books on music, woodworking, beekeeping. None of them seemed to be books you actually read—like, books with stories in them. I noticed an entire shelf of psychology books with titles like, *Understanding Trauma, Breaking Down Broken Homes, Origins of Violence.*

"That's a good one," Cody said from behind me as I pulled one out.

"Is this how you're trained to see people?" I flipped through the pages of diagrams examining tiny gestures—raised eyebrows, downturned lips—it made me feel so exposed realizing that Cody was

analyzing every little gesture I made. I closed it and looked at the title —*The Naked Ape: a Zoologist's Study of the Human Animal.*

"Do psychologists really see people as animals?"

"People are animals, aren't they?"

I shrugged and stuck the book back on the shelf next to *The interpretation of Dreams.*

I noticed a book with rabbits on the cover. The one next to it had a towering bear with the word, *Shardik* across it.

"Are these kids books?"

"Nah, that's my favourite book. It's about a bear with the powers of God."

"Wonder why that's your favourite."

"Bring it here."

I cuddled in next to Cody on the couch and opened the book. He leaned into me, and I couldn't help laughing, because he definitely seemed like a kid. I remembered how I used to read to my sister, and that made it hard to pay attention to the words. Something numb threatened to crawl over my skin, so I just focused on Cody. At some point, he let his head fall into my shoulder and fell asleep.

I wasn't sure what to call the feeling in my chest. It swelled out until I felt like I was bursting with it. It wasn't exactly happiness, but it just felt *good.* To know that I was taking care of him—that I was capable of taking care of anyone.

Then I felt bad for thinking that. The last thing I wanted was to be grateful that he was sick. My gut twisted as I reminded myself that I couldn't take care of anyone. Not even myself.

I pulled a bookmark sticking out of the middle of the book, and I was about to tuck it into the page we'd left on when I noticed what it was.

It looked to be sliced from a postcard; one side was a glossy photo of mountain ranges. The tops of the letters of ALASKA were just barely visible in the cutout portion. I turned it over.

'*We will always love you,*

Mom & Dad'

Did Cody have any idea how lucky he was?

I closed the postcard in the book and leaned into him. It was so nice being next to him while he dreamed.

The sun had started setting when Cody woke up again. The orange glow seeped through the humidity in the air, streaming into the room, making the cabin soft and sleepy. I was relaxed in a way I didn't even know was possible.

"You want dinner?" he asked, stretching. "I feel like cooking." He had a big smile plastered on his face that made me wonder what he'd been dreaming about.

"I think the power's still out."

"Would you rather barbeque or campfire?"

"Are you su—"

"Barbeque or campfire?" he repeated, squaring his shoulders. That wild energy was back in his face. His muscles looked so powerful as he stretched the kinks out of them.

"Err, campfire."

"Good answer." His eyes locked on mine as a grin spread across his face.

"I can't deal with your smile." I bit my lip, chewing at the worn skin just a bit too much.

"I know." Cody's grin only widened as he walked to the kitchen, grabbing a box of matches and some crumpled newspaper from under the kitchen sink.

It was like he'd lit a match and tossed it in my stomach. I was squirming from the heat; stuttering; stumbling; bumbling. I licked my lips, like that would help put out the fire still burning on them from his kiss. My breath was still gushing unevenly, my palms still sweaty. I was waiting for a chance to take the plunge and just kiss him again, but everytime I chickened out. His dominance stole all my confidence in a way that didn't exactly feel bad.

"Don't forget to take your meds." He tossed the matches and newspaper into a crate, along with other things I wasn't paying attention to, because I was looking at his… I was looking at him.

"Don't forget to take *your* meds," I said back. "We don't want to fuck the whole world up."

He popped a pill in his mouth and his grin widened as he watched me watch him. We both needed therapists. We were acting crazy, grinning like lunatics.

I took an antibiotic from my own bottle and followed him outside. A few curious chickens separated from the sea to scratch behind us as Cody led the way to a rock firepit. He spread out the blanket he'd grabbed from the couch. His arms bulged against his T-shirt as he pulled blocks of wood from the crate and lay them out in a precise triangular shape.

"You don't have to push yourself—" I started.

"I'm not." He shoved some newspaper into the triangle and lit a match. "Someone has to cook dinner. Something tells me it's not going to be you. I'd order out, but last time I did that, it didn't work out so well." He looked up at me grinning. "I mean, the dinner part didn't work out—but there was a pretty big silver lining."

My cheeks were an inferno as a fire crackled under the wood. Cody blew gently, sending smoke and sparks into the damp air. I couldn't tear my eyes from the way his muscled shoulders stretched

his tight T-shirt as he stooped to get lower to the fire.

"But you can't be feeling well."

"You saying I don't look good again?" He looked up. His teeth teased his lower lip.

"No, just—"

"I thought I told you to stop worrying about me." He rose and took a step towards me, his shoulders blocking out the setting sun. He gripped my chin and gave it a shake. "As cute as it is, I don't want to see you upset."

The fire rose above the logs, charring them as it sent thick, stinking smoke into the air.

"Probably not the best weather for this." Cody covered his face with his elbow as he set a folding grill over the fire.

I wanted to apologize for choosing the campfire, but I didn't think Cody would like that, so I bit my tongue instead and watched him put two pans onto the grill. He dropped a raw red steak into one of the pans and a slab of butter into the other, followed by five eggs. The mingling aroma of smoke and food was tantalizing. He stirred the eggs carefully and sprinkled the smushed mushrooms into it. A couple of the mushrooms went onto the steak, and I couldn't help wondering if any of them were of the more deadly variety.

"Do you ever get lonely out here?" I asked. "You don't seem to have any neighbours."

"I get on alright by myself." He stirred at the eggs in the pan, somehow turning them into the fluffiest thing I'd ever seen. Even the maybe-poisonous-sponges looked delicious. "I'd rather spend time by myself than be around toxic people, you know?"

"Not really."

He looked up at me, slightly serious. "Sometimes the world can be fucked up, and it's nice to be able to step away from it."

"Right." Maybe he did have some idea of how much reality sucked. "What about your parents? Do you ever miss them?"

"Yeah." His lips pressed together as he poked at the fire. "It'd be nice to be able to go home."

"Why don't you?"

He was quiet for a minute before looking up at me, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Maybe I'm just waiting for the right person to take home to my parents."

"Who do you think you're impressing with your cheesy lines?"

"I think I'm impressing the hell out of you."

I plucked the head off a dandelion and threw it at him. The flower bounced off his head and shriveled in the fire. Cody's grin widened as his eyes threatened to devour me.

I'd never seen a person smile so much until I met Cody. No

matter what he was doing, there was a faint smile on his lips. Everytime he looked up at me, it widened, and the fire seemed to grow ten degrees hotter. Finally, he scooped the eggs onto a plate.

"I've never been on a picnic before." I grinned as he handed me the plate.

"God, you are so fucking cute." He moved so fast I didn't have time to anticipate his warm lips before they covered mine. I almost dropped the eggs as his fingers wove through my hair. He kissed me deep, not waiting for me to open my lips for him before forcing his tongue into my mouth. I moaned, but pulled back sharply.

"Shit, I forgot. Should you kiss me… I mean, if you're sick."

"We're both sick, right?"

"I don't feel sick." I looked into his deep eyes.

"Me neither." He kissed me again. My lips fell slack as the coarse hair on his chin rubbed against my face. My breath came faster as my mouth filled with the taste of his raw masculinity. His fingers teased my hair as his other hand gripped my chin, stroking up and down my jawbone as he explored deeper inside of me.

He pulled back panting. The sun was nearly gone and his eyes looked dark with lust. I'd never had anyone look at me that way—with that dominance and desire.

"Look what you made me do!" Cody pulled the steak off the fire onto a plate. "I wanted medium rare."

"Sorry."

He just laughed.

"Are you sure it's okay to kiss me?" I chewed my lip. "Is kissing someone who's sick one of those antibiotic things that will fuck up the whole world?"

"Can I be honest with you, Trav?" He pulled a beer from the crate and tossed a water bottle at my feet.

"Okay."

"Sometimes I act like I know what I'm talking about, but I really don't."

"Oh." I laughed just a bit. "I guess I kinda figured that out already."

His hands paused on his knife as he was about to saw into the hunk of bloody steak. "What else have you figured out?"

I felt that hot squirm again. He wasn't looking at me, but I still had to drop my eyes to the ground. "Uh, I guess I've figured out… that you really like me."

"That's half right." His knife scraped across his plate. "Sometimes I look at you, and I think I could really, really love you."

I dropped the water bottle.

Cody just laughed and bit into his steak. I poked at the eggs,

because my body had gotten so hot that my brain had melted, and I couldn't remember how to eat. I took a drink, choking on the water as it went down.

"Oh, shit, did you get one of the poisonous ones?" Cody looked up as he popped a mushroom into his mouth. His grin widened at my expression. "Kidding."

"Sometimes I wonder if everything you're doing is just a game to tease me."

"It is." He raked his teeth across his lower lip. "And I'm winning pretty hard right now."

"But you're sure these aren't poisonous, right?" I poked at one of the mushrooms in the delicious looking eggs and tried to find the mental capacity to eat it.

"Only one way to find out." He popped another one in his mouth. "You trust me, right?"

My heart thudded. I took a bite.

"Atta boy."

The fire was so hot I could barely stand it. I took another bite, and another. I couldn't help glancing at Cody's steak jealously until he caught my gaze.

"Does it bother you watching me eat this?" He pushed his plate away on his lap.

I shook my head.

"You never have to lie to me, Trav."

"I thought I told you to stop making weird promises… and I thought I told you to stop calling me that."

"But you love it so much."

I ate another poisonous mushroom with the slight hope that I would die, and escape Cody's smile, but I had a sneaking suspicion that I was already dead. Sitting in that moment felt oddly like heaven, and was fucking hot as hell.

"C'mere." He grabbed my plate, set it on the ground, and pulled me away from the fire, into the growing darkness.

"What are you doing?"

"We're going to give this cow's best friend a proper burial."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but you don't have to stop eating your dinner for me."

His lips brushed mine and that shut me up. I could feel his grin against my face, feel the way his teeth raked against his lip. "I just wanna see you smile, baby."

"Definitely don't call me that."

He laughed as he dropped to the ground and started raking at the dirt with his hands like some kind of animal. He was animal alright; completely wild and out of control; unpredictable; possessive;

dominating; so fucking sweet; irresistibly cuddly; and thicker skulled than anyone I'd ever met. *Oh, God, Cody, what are you doing to me?*

"You wanna say any words?" He asked as he scraped his dinner into the dirt. After he'd spent so much time cooking, I couldn't believe he was just dumping his food into a hole on the vague belief that it might make me happy.

"I wanna know what you're doing."

"I'm just showing you that I can be as sweet and gentle as you." He covered the meat with dirt and patted it down.

"I think you're teasing me again."

"I'm always teasing you, Trav." He put his arm around me. "Now are you gonna officiate this funeral or am I?"

"You threw your dinner in the dirt, man."

"I didn't like the way it was making you look." He stroked his thumb across my lip. "I just wanna see you smile."

I did smile. And I couldn't stop smiling, because he was being so fucking silly. It was stupid. And I loved it.

I cleared my throat. "I uh, I hope your best cow-friend is waiting for you up in heaven." I frowned, wondering if I should've hoped that his best friend was already dead. "And I'm sorry Cody ate part of you."

Cody broke into a laugh beside me and pulled me into his lips.

"I really think I could love you, Trav."

I pulled away, slow and reluctant. "You're making weird promises again. I don't know how you can say things like that."'

"Because it feels true. Doesn't it feel true to you?" He ran his thumb over my raw, chewed up lip. "What is it? What do you want to tell me?"

"I never said I wanted to tell you anything."

"I can sense it." His fingers stroked down my neck, pressing against the frantically pulsing vein in my throat. "I can feel what's in your heart, baby."

"I told you not to call me that."

"You gonna pull a knife on me again?"

"Somehow, I don't think you'd mind."

"Not really." His voice grew huskier as the space between our lips got smaller and smaller.

"How can you think I'm a nice guy after that?"

"I can just feel you. I get a sense for people." He raked his teeth across my lips, forcing my balls to pull up to my body and a moan to push out of my mouth. "—And you are so fucking tender." He kissed me deep, gripping the back of my neck and stroking my earlobe with his thumb, I could feel the gritty dirt on his hands. The way Cody touched was like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

He pulled away suddenly, like he'd just realized something. "Have you ever… you know, had sex with a guy before? That's not what's bothering you, is it? Because I can take this so slow you'll beg for me to touch you."

"You're not the first…" My heart fluttered against my chest. "I mean, yeah I've had sex before."

"With who?" He ran his fingers up and down the back of my neck. "Any guy who put his lips on you is getting pounded into the dirt." He shook his head. "Kidding."

"Somehow I still think you'd pound them into the dirt."

"Do I look like the kind of guy who'd beat on people?" He suddenly sounded serious.

"No." I put a brave hand on his chest. "You don't look like a guy at all. You look like a bear."

"Then if it's not that, what is it? Tell me what's bothering you."

"You say that like it's easy."

"You'd be surprised how easy it can be."

He put his arm around me and led me back to the fire. The stars were so clear as I picked my dinner back up from where I'd left it. Cody stuck his own fork on my plate and started eating off it without asking if I was okay with that. Those considerations typically escaped him. I guess it was the least I could do after he misguidedly destroyed his own dinner for me… and cooked mine… and let me stay in his house… and saved my life. A lump stuck in my throat as I swallowed one of the mushrooms.

Cody poked at the fire and cracked open another beer. He put his arm around me. I leaned into his body. He smelled like smoke; and wild; and man. Chickens clucked and cooed somewhere in the darkness as they settled into sleep, and bugs chattered amongst themselves. I could've stayed out there under the stars with Cody all night, but something electric hung in the air, giving me the sense that the summer storms hadn't finished passing though yet.

"You ready to talk to me yet?"

"I never said I would." The shaking in my chest was more of a tremble than a heartbeat.

"But you want to." He kicked at the fire with his boot. Sparks flew up through the darkness and the heat around us intensified. "You want to see this go further, but you don't think you can get close to me with whatever's going through your head—you want to tell me about it, so I can reassure you and tell you how sweet and wonderful you are."

I snorted.

"Just tell me what's on your mind. That's all I'm asking." His

hand found mine and his thumb stroked soft circles. “C’mon.” He jostled my shoulder.

“I just don’t see the point.”

“I promise you’ll feel better once you tell me what’s on your mind.”

“No, I mean, that’s what’s on my mind—I don’t see the point of this.”

“I guess there isn’t one? We’re just two guys enjoying each other’s company… and other things.”

“But…” I licked my lip and resisted the urge to chew it. “But it just seems stupid. Like you’re so fucking amazing and I just… I’m just...” My tongue felt too tied up to speak, and I wondered if it was the poisonous mushrooms taking effect.

“It’s not cute when you go fishing for compliments, Trav.”

“Don’t call me that.” I looked into the fire. “Can we be serious?”

“I can try.”

“I just don’t want you to realize I’m too much trouble.” I rubbed my knuckles as I stared into the fire.

“I think you’d be surprised what kind of trouble I’ve dealt with.”

I chewed my lip, then stopped. “I have people looking for me.”

“I already knew that.”

“I stole some money.”

“I already knew that,” he repeated.

“My mom’s boyfriend is looking for me so he can beat the shit out of me, maybe even kill me.” I tried to hide the way my hands shook at those last words. “He’s got friends. Bad friends.”

“And if they come here to find you. They’re going to get pounded into the dirt.” He squeezed me around the waist, almost too roughly. “I can promise you that.”

“You don’t have—”

“No one is ever going to hurt you. Not when you’re with me.”

That wasn’t what I wanted to hear, but I didn’t really know what I wanted to hear.

“Can I tell you something?” I asked.

“That’s what I’ve been asking you.”

“I’m terrified of waking up from all this.”

“I don’t want to shatter your sense of reality, but this isn’t a dream.”

“I… I mean… I don’t want to sound sorry for myself… but I haven’t had the best life.”

“I could tell.” He stroked the outline of my tattoo.

I didn’t know if I wanted to be closer to him or further from

him, but it didn't really matter, because he wouldn't let me go.

"I don't want you to realize I'm not a great guy."

"I want you to realize you are."

"I haven't been great to my family." I chewed my lip. "After my mom died, my sister told me it was all my fault."

"So that's why you're blaming yourself." A low growl rose from Cody's chest.

I shook my head against his shoulder. "No. She was right. I told you I have a temper. I make people feel like shit. I don't even know how I think of some of the awful things I say when I lose it."

"Sounds like you're not the only person in your family with that problem."

"My sister was just seventeen. A kid. She wasn't old enough to deal with…" My throat got tight. I took a breath. Another. Started again. "All my life I've been trying to protect her from how fucking horrible the world is. Back when we were kids, and my mom and Axel would get real loud, I used to shut us in her closet and read to her with a flashlight. I'd talk loud, close in her ear, and cover her other one, so she wouldn't have to hear how ugly her parents were."

Everything in the world felt so bitter as memories came back to me. I had nothing sweet to hold onto anymore. I'd tainted everything. Fucked it all up.

"The night I yelled at my mom, I found my sister sobbing in her closet." All the stars disappeared above us. My voice grew distant and hollow. "She told me to stay away from her." My hands shook. "She was scared of me. I was the ugly one. Then my mom…" I didn't have to say it. Cody already knew that part. "My sister just went inside herself. Stopped talking to me. I tried to put my arms around her before we drove to the funeral, and she finally broke. She hit me. Scratched my face. Told me..."

"You don't have to keep talking." Cody stroked up and down my back, but I pulled away from him.

"I broke too. Told her if she realized how horrible our mom was to us, she'd fucking kill herself, too."

I felt—more than heard Cody's sharp inhale of breath. It was like he was sucking the air out of my own lungs. He held the breath for a couple seconds before releasing it, slow and calm.

"You're pulling the knife again." His fingers stroked up my hair. "How many times do I have to tell you that you're not going to scare me away?"

"You're not a smart guy, Cody." I brushed his hand away.

"I never pretended to be."

"I got myself into some shit." I ran my hands through my hair, tugging too hard. "I stole some money."

“You already said that.” His tone was gentle. “What does this have to do with your sister?”

“Because… because I hate myself for what I said to her. I hate myself for everything I’ve said, or done, or wanted to do.”

“Calm down.” He ran his hand over my back, making me realize I’d been shaking. “You’re losing your train of thought. What are you trying to tell me?”

“I don’t know if I was trying to get her to forgive me… or if I was trying to forgive myself… I was saving money for her to go to school. She graduated high school this spring. I wanted her to have a future so she could get out of all this garbage, but what I saved wasn’t enough. It would never have been enough.”

“So you stole from your mom’s boyfriend.” Cody didn’t say that like a realization. He said it like he’d already guessed everything.

“Yeah. I wasn’t thinking. Just panicking. Like I always do.” I looked down at the space between my feet. “I was trying to get her to come away with me, so she could go to school, but it still wasn’t enough, and she still hated me.”

“I think you’ve gotten yourself all mixed up, but if it means that much to you, I’ll pay for her to go to school.” He nuzzled my ear with his nose. “It’s not like I’m short on cash.”

My entire body trembled. Even my voice felt shaky before I said a word. “It doesn’t matter anymore.” I stopped, because I didn’t know how to continue. Every word felt too ugly and raw to speak into existence. I sat there and felt the trembling of my hands for what felt like an eternity. Cody put his arm around my shoulder. The steady strength of his muscles did nothing to stop my shaking, but it did give me the courage to speak.

“She committed suicide two months ago.”

I didn’t realize I was crying until I felt my tears against the skin of Cody’s neck where he’d buried my face. The strength of his body still didn’t do anything to stop my trembling, but his warmth helped to sooth the numbness freezing my skin. His thumb stroked the back of my neck, right below my hairline, as I poured tears into the crook of his throat. His adam’s apple bobbed against my temple and his chest shook as he exhaled. I felt something wet fall from his jaw onto my cheek. It was so warm. His hand slid into my hair and clutched me closer to him. I wrapped my arms around his waist and he wrapped his free arm around mine. I let go of the sobs I’d been holding inside myself for so long. I let all the tears pour out. I let it all spill and mingle with the sweat of Cody’s skin as he held me like no one ever had.

Held me like he’d never let me go.

Chapter Fifteen
How Do You Keep Getting Me Naked?

I guess you could say I woke up after our second session. I'd never known a therapist before, but I didn't think it was common to cuddle your patients all night. In fact, I was sure it would be frowned upon by most professionals.

I was in my boxers, but in every other way I was so naked for him. He was stripping me bare, peeling back all the ugly layers, and I didn't know why he was doing it, or why it felt so good.

He grazed his fingers down my spine as I raised my head. There was something relaxing about the soft light soaking through the enormous window of his bedroom, even though it was another wet, dreary sunrise.

"Good morning, lovely."

"Don't call me that," I murmured as I turned my face to him.

"I'll try not to." He grinned. "But I won't try very hard."

All I could do was stare into his deep brown eyes and wonder how they could be so kind and so commanding at the same time. I couldn't understand how someone so hard and muscled could have such gentle fingers. I didn't understand how he could pull all the ugliness out of me and make me feel so good about spilling my secrets. I didn't understand Cody.

"How do you not hate me yet?" I dropped my head back onto the pillow.

"How are you still asking stupid questions?"

His hand moved down my back, grazing my asscheek through the soft fabric. I didn't think he was even aware he was touching me half the time he did it. Everything he did was thoughtless in the best way. He just acted on what he wanted.

"I think you might be the kindest person I've ever met." I took his wandering hand in mine. "I just don't understand what you're doing with someone like me."

He grabbed me by the waist, and pulled me into him, running his nose along my hairline. "If I ever hear you say that again, I'm going to spank your sweet ass." He must've felt my sharp inhale, because he added, "Kidding." He kissed the back of my neck. "But I do want you to stop saying those things. You're the kindest, softest person I've ever met."

"I'm starting to think you just see things however you want to see them."

"I'm starting to think the same about you."

I would've thought laying half naked in bed with a man who was trying to get into my head would confuse the hell out of me, but I'd never felt so relaxed. I was on firm, fragrant earth after spending my life drowning.

"I love watching you open up," Cody murmured in my ear. "It's so beautiful how strong you are. How much you've been able to withstand." His fingers grazed down the back of my neck. "I knew from the moment I saw you that you had a story that would break my heart."

"Are you wishing you hadn't heard it?"

"Not at all."

"Do you still think..." I swallowed, told myself to stop talking, then went on anyways. "Do you still think I'm someone you could love?"

"In a weird way, I love you already." He laughed and tickled under my armpits as he felt my body go stiff. "Not like, *will you marry me?* just like—well—I'm kinda infatuated with you, Trav. I wanna hold you. Keep you. Make you mine."

"That's kinda fucked up." I turned to him, grinning. "Sorry I'm such an ass."

"You're so not an ass." He kissed me and laughed into my lips.

I laughed back. "Good thing I'm not paying you for any of this therapy or this would be a seriously fucked-up situation."

He raked his teeth across my lip as he pulled back. "Good thing…"

"What?" I scanned his suddenly dark face. "I didn't mean it. There's nothing fucked-up about what we're doing. I mean maybe there is. No wait, there's not—" I stopped when he put his finger to my lips. My heart thumped against my chest. Maybe I really had revealed too much of how ugly and broken I was. My breath stuck in my chest.

"What?" I repeated. "You're scaring me. Why aren't you talking? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"I…" I pushed the hair away from my forehead. "I really need this, Cody." My breath came fast and hard and I couldn't control it. "I had no idea how bad I needed you until you found me."

His eyes looked almost golden as he stared into my face. He was so silent I could hear the *thump thump thump* of his strong heart. Then he kissed me; this time hard and completely unrestrained.

His hands were everywhere on my body; stroking my throat;

teasing my thighs; tangling in my hair. He swallowed me whole with his touch as he devoured me with his kiss. His coarse hair scratched against my face, but I didn't want him to stop. Even more than his body, it was the heat of him being so close that forced my breath to stutter out of my chest in hard puffs. His musk and energy formed a cage around me even stronger than his muscled arms.

His fingers grazed down my ribs, forcing my spine to arch as he reached my waist. His stiffness pushed against his boxers, pressing into my thighs. He rocked his hips, grinding his hardness into me, stroking his muscled abs against my own throbbing cock.

My heart stopped. Raced. Stopped again. Pounded like feet running through a dark forest.

Cody wouldn't stop kissing me, or touching me, or forcing me to open up for him. I moaned into his lips, even as his body completely overwhelmed me. His fingers slipped into the waistband of my boxers. Hot and cold ran over my skin in the same breath. We were about to go further; so much further. Something was about to be cemented between us.

I couldn't get my heart to stop pounding. I couldn't get my head to stop swimming. I couldn't…

"I can't." I put my hand over his just as it slipped into my boxers.

He paused, but didn't move his hand away. "What's wrong?"

"Nothings wrong, I just—" I stopped, because I didn't know where I was taking that thought. "You make me nervous," I finally admitted.

"It looks pretty damned cute on you." His eyes crinkled.

"You're so…" My eyes traced the enormous line of his shoulders. I started over. "Sometimes I can't resist doing what you want. Sometimes that scares me."

"What'd I tell you about worrying?" He rubbed his rough cheek against mine.

"It's hard not to." His hand was still in my pants, so heavy on my thigh. "When I said I'd been with other guys before… I was lying. I'm sorry." I ran my hands through my hair. "God, I'm sorry. I promise I'll never lie to you again—"

He kissed me to stop my rambling. "It's okay."

"I just didn't want you to think it freaked me out."

"But you are freaked out." He started drawing his hand slowly from my boxers. I held it there.

"It's not that you're a guy…" I chewed my lip until it hurt. "It's that you're so, so…" I looked up at his body, felt the strength of his desire pushing down on me. "Dominating."

He sat back grinning, and I think he wanted to laugh, but he

didn't.

"I'm only ever going to make you feel good, baby." The huskiness of his voice forced a hard throb through my cock.

"Those aren't the kinds of promises you can make."

The busted side table drawer squeaked as he opened it, and drew out the lengths of black silk.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"I'm trying to."

"Try less." He ran the cool fabric over my wrists. "We're going to play a game, okay?"

I stared at him, trying to keep the uncertainty from my face.

"I promise you'll like it."

"I don't know if I like your weird promises."

"You love them." He couldn't resist a small laugh. "I'm going to tie you to the bed." He twisted the silk slowly around my wrist, sliding it into a knot. "And I'm not going to touch you unless you ask me to."

The knot hadn't restricted my movement at all, but I suddenly felt trapped, caught, owned. And suddenly all my resistance was gone. I wanted Cody to tie me down, take all the power and responsibility from me.

He tied a second length around my other wrist and pushed me gently onto the bed so I laid on my stomach. My muscles bent with his will. My heart pounded, but now it was a slow, steady throb of anticipation. I felt even more of my power slip away as Cody tied the silk to the bedpost. Every inch of my skin tingled in anticipation of his touch. I'd never felt anything so amazing as having my strength completely stripped from me. My cock throbbed against the sheets as he spread my legs, and tied my ankles to the bed. I was completely trapped; completely his.

"I'm going to start at your feet." His voice was softer than the silk, but still so commanding. "And I'm not going to move higher until you say, *please*." He knelt next to the bed and put his hands on my foot. Just that tiny touch sent the breath bursting from my chest as heat throbbed through me.

I wanted more. So much more.

I lay there panting helplessly as he ran his hands over my bound foot, stroking at first, but then he started rubbing deep in the arch. My moan was a combination of arousal and tension being driven out of my body by his strong hands kneading at the stiff little muscles. He moved to the other foot, squeezing at the heel, digging down the arch, separating all my toes and pulling on each one gently. I'd almost forgotten it was supposed to be sexual until I felt his breath on my skin, and then his lips kissing down the sides of my feet. I squirmed at

the odd sensation. I could honestly say I'd never had someone touch my feet before. Not like that.

Not anything like that.

His kisses felt like another form of control, like he was commanding me to enjoy his touch. And I did. I really, really did. When his lips wrapped around my big toe, and sucked the sensitive skin into his warm, wet mouth, all I could do was whimper, "Please."

A growl rumbled from his chest, and it sounded almost like a laugh and almost like a groan, but definitely pure pleasure. His enormous knees pushed my ankles apart as he kissed up my legs, first one, then the other, stopping just below the backs of my knees.

I licked my lips. "Please."

His kisses seared against the sensitive skin behind my knees. My back arched. I'd been completely oblivious to how good it felt to be touched there. Cody ran his fingers up and down my feet as he kissed me in places I'd never even thought about. It was like he was waking my body up for the first time.

I whimpered as he traced the crease of my knee with his tongue, brushed his fingers up my legs, sending electrical currents throbbing through my body. My cock ached against the sheets. I was so aware of how enormous he was and how trapped I was beneath him.

"Please." My own words made the hardness in my cock intensify until it begged for friction.

My entire body ached for him as he kissed up my thighs. My breath quickened for every inch of skin he captured. His fingertips traced slow circles on the backs of my knees; slickened by his lips and tongue. He let out a low moan into my thigh as he reached the spot just below my ass. He teased back the fabric of the boxers and stroked the skin in a way that lit it on fire. I didn't know how such gentle touch could feel so forceful. He had me tied up, but I didn't feel out of control. Cody was the biggest contradiction I'd ever met. Too good to be true.

"Oh God, please," I moaned as his lips caressed the bottom of my asscheek.

He slipped his fingers into the waistband of my boxers, and lowered them, forcing them to stretch across my splayed thighs. The tension in the fabric threatened to tear my boxers in half as Cody positioned himself between my legs spreading them even further. His breath was so hot and heavy as he ran his nose across the curve of my ass.

"You have such a beautiful body," he groaned into my skin as he slid his hand under me.

A spasm ran through me as his huge warm hand wrapped

around my aching cock. I bucked my hips up, pushing my asscheek into his face, but he just groaned and stroked me slowly, teasing his fingers over the pre-cum leaking from my slit, stroking it over my tip. All I could think about was what his unbelievable lips would feel like there.

"We can stop whenever you want to," he said, though he didn't stop stroking me. "We don't have to—"

"I want it all," I gasped. "Everything. All of it. All of you. I want it."

I felt his breath in my chest again. His sharp inhale sucked all the emotion out of me for just one second. He exhaled in a low rumble against my skin as he groaned out, "Then I'm going to give it to you, baby. All of it."

He jerked my hips up, holding me in his strong hands as he slid under me. I writhed against his grip as his tongue ran up the length of my cock, teasing every throbbing vein. I could barely hold back all the pressure as pre-cum leaked from me, and he'd barely even touched my cock yet.

I'd received enough blowjobs in my life, and seen plenty in porn—dirty, messy, sexy—but nothing about Cody's lips sliding over my tip felt like that. Cody's lips were a kiss; passionate, tender, demanding. He wanted to feel my skin in his mouth, wanted to feel my pleasure as he drew my climax out of me.

I moaned and tried to move my hips as he took more and more of my shaft in his warm, silken mouth, but his hold was so firm that I couldn't steal any more friction from his lips than he was giving me. I panted as I pushed at his throat, and the coarseness of his beard wore at the tender skin of my pelvis. He took me just a bit further, pressing his lips into my skin as I squeezed into his tight throat. My thighs quaked against his hands. I leaned into my elbows, gasping. My ankles jerked against the silk, but I was so trapped.

He pushed my hips up, raising my body, and forcing my length to draw *slowly* out of his wet lips. My moans became whimpers. I just wanted to fall back into him. I wanted him to give me more of that wet friction. He lowered me again, just enough for my tip to brush against his lips in a way that was pure torture, because I wanted so much more than the wet kisses he was leaving all over my skin. It felt like he would have savoured my need all day if I hadn't moaned out, "Oh God, please, Cody." My thighs shook against his hands, "Please, I need to give you my cum."

The groan that rumbled out of him was completely animal. His hands dug into my thighs, grabbing me roughly for the first time. "Mmm, yeah, give me everything."

He plunged my cock down into his mouth, lifting and lowering

my hips like he was doing bench presses with my body. His groans weren't of exertion, though, it was all unrestrained lust pouring out of him.

I couldn't hold on. My limbs tore at the restraints, but I couldn't get free from him. I was completely trapped in the climax tearing at my body and mind. Even my soul felt like it was being torn out by his gentle lips and teasing tongue. I shuddered, gasped, lost all my strength, and fell into him. He moaned against my throbbing skin as I poured out into his mouth.

I was still twitching and throbbing when he push me up just enough to give himself room to swallow my cum.

My cock was still impossibly hard as he ran his lips over it, kissing, licking, moaning into the wet skin. I thought he was going to tease me with his lips forever until he slid out from under me and lay me back onto the bed. He put a hand on the small of my back as he moved to untie me.

"Stop!" I said quickly. "I mean…" My chest heaved. "Don't stop. I mean... I want you to keep touching me."

His hand pressed hard onto my back, smushing me to the bed as a groan erupted from his wet lips.

He ran his fingers up and down my bound wrist. "How do you want me to touch you?" Something about that sounded more like a dare than a question.

"However you want." I swallowed. "Just do whatever you want. I want to see how good you can feel too."

I'd wandered onto the bear's territory, and I was his to do with as he pleased.

"You sure about that, baby?" He put both his hands on my asscheeks and squeezed them so hard they pulled apart.

"Don't call me that," I groaned.

"But you love it so much." His hand came down in a teasing smack against my ass. There was almost no force behind it, but I was so hyper-aware of my skin that it sent tingles of pain up my spine. Cody stroked the spot where he'd slapped me. "Is that okay?"

I nodded, because I couldn't speak. Even that bit of pain felt gentle, loving. How was that possible? The way he took control of my body just left me craving more. And more.

And more.

He slapped my ass again, and for the first time I was afraid he might not hold back if I said, *stop*. The energy pouring from his needy touch was so wild and animal.

I breathed, slowly, and remembered the reason why I trusted him; Cody would never hurt me; he would never hurt anyone. He was wild, but he was gentle right down to his core.

His wet lips ran all the way up my spine and buried themselves in my hair. All his enormous weight rested on me as he gripped my hips. He kissed my shoulders like he was starving for my skin. He still had his boxers on, but I could feel him so hard, thrusting against my ass.

It was so much more than his body that was turning me on; it was the way he held me, kissed me, talked to me.

"I want you so bad," I breathed into the pillow. My cock throbbed as if Cody hadn't just swallowed all my aching need. I wanted him; wanted to see how good I could make him feel; wanted to see him lose control.

I was so aware of my own hot breath against the pillow as Cody lowered his boxers. My pounding heartbeat stole my senses for the split second when I felt his bare cock connect with the skin of my ass.

I lay helplessly tied as he dug the lube from the nightstand. He squirted a huge dollop into one hand, and ran the other hand down my goosebumped skin.

"Just tell me to stop if you want me to stop."

"I won't tell you to stop."

His fingers slid between my cheeks, forcing my back to arch as I resisted the urge to shy away. He was touching me in another place I'd never given much thought to. His cool, slick fingers felt so foreign as they stroked me, but I raised my hips up into his touch.

He put a hand on the small of my back, pressing me back down into the bed. "Relax. Don't move. Let all your muscles go limp."

There was that tone again; the one I couldn't argue with.

His command stole all the strength from my muscles. Even as his fingers gently prodded me open, I didn't tense.

"Relax," he repeated as I winced at the heat spreading through me. He exhaled long and slow in a way that made my body want to mimic his calm breath. He drew his finger in and out, adding more lube, and then the heat and stretch intensified as he used another finger.

I wanted to clench my teeth and tense my muscles. My cock started to soften from the burning stretch. I wanted to pull away from the ache of his huge fingers, but I lay still; like he wanted.

"Atta boy," he moaned. His voice dripped with lust as he slid his fingers in and out of me, the other hand pinning me down, as if I was going anywhere with my hands tied, legs spread open.

His breath sped in time to his fingers thrusting inside of me. The heat faded; melting into intense pressure. He stroked, stretched, and forced me open until I couldn't stop the moans trembling out of my chest. A twitch ran through my cock as he slid another finger

inside of me. I felt stretched like the boxers tearing around my calves. Pushed down; suppressed; controlled; owned.

Cody drew his fingers from me, leaving hollow need. His hands clenched on my ass, pulling my cheeks apart. Our chests heaved with the same sucking rhythm. Feeling him press into me felt like the slow, unstoppable force of an avalanche.

Something surfaced in my mind, but I stuffed it down. I didn't want to think of anything other than his body. His tip stroked against my burning ring, the thought came back, and I couldn't suppress it again.

"Condoms," I groaned.

His hands tensed on my asscheeks, spreading them even further. A growl of a groan rumbled from his chest, and he bucked, just barely, but it sent a wave of needy pleasure through me.

"Oh, fuck, I just want to feel you." His voice was husky and completely lost in lust. His hips pulled back and teased forward, forcing me to feel how large his head was. He stared down at my spread hole, and I just wanted to feel the way he could fill me.

My muscles tensed. "You can't just—"

"Relax." He pulled his cock from my hole, only to run it up and down my crack. He reached into the nightstand and tore open a foil packet.

When he brought his tip back against me, I couldn't resist bucking up into him.

He pressed down on my back and put his face to my neck so that his words sent shivers down my spine. "Don't move. Just relax. Just let me make you feel so fucking good you can't even stand it."

He rolled his hips, teasing against my entrance. My body begged me to buck into him and capture more of that amazing pressure. Cody wrapped his arms around me, trapping me in his body more than ever.

I got that feeling again; something solidifying; everything about to change.

And then he thrust into me. My mouth fell open as he forced the air from my lungs in a long, aching groan. Only the feeling of his body crushed against mine made the pressure of his hugeness bearable. I didn't tense, didn't clench my muscles as he pushed deeper and deeper inside of me. I couldn't suck any air into my lungs. He pulled out, and pushed in, again and again, giving me time to adjust to his enormous girth, but nothing could help how stretched I felt around him.

"Oh my God…" He whispered into my hair, grabbing at it like he was trying to keep from slipping down a mountain. "You're so fucking perfect."

I couldn't breathe. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. It wasn't just my body that Cody was touching in completely new ways.

He thrust into me again—this time all the way, until his hips pressed into my asscheeks. Cody's body; his breath on my neck; his hands on my skin; his cock inside me; was everything I'd ached for my entire life.

"Oh, God, Cody, just fuck me." I groaned into the pillow.

He smiled against my neck, nipped my ear, kissed my cheek. "I don't fuck, baby." His fingers teased down my chest and pinched my nipple. "I'm going to make love to you."

Something about what he'd said—the way he'd said it—the way he touched me—the way he did everything—was almost violating. And yet...

The tender way he took my body was infinitely more raw and messy than fucking. He was owning more than my skin. He was digging inside me, finding the most secret parts of my heart, and completely possessing them.

His kisses fell over my shoulders as he slammed into me. If I'd thought his musk had been amplified by the forest, it was nothing compared to the testosterone filled sweat dripping from his face onto the back of my neck. The air became blanketed with the scent of our passion, of all that emotion Cody was pulling out of me with his demanding fingers and kind eyes and deep voice.

His balls brushed my thighs as his hips slapped my ass. Hard. Crushing. He grabbed me by the hair, only to turn my head around so he could capture my mouth in his. My lips were slacked, gaping, and completely unable to ward off his tongue as it plunged inside of me. Not that I would have. It was never his strength that kept me from resisting him. He moaned into the hollow chasm of my mouth with the same rhythm as his slow, stretching thrusts into my ass. My body slid forward every time he came down on me, stroking my cock against the sheets. One of his hands slipped down my body to touch my shaft in teasing strokes. The only thing I could comprehend was his body, and the way it made me feel. I was so completely filled by him, and I just… I just...

I screamed. Groaned. Twisted. But there was no escaping his hold. He pounded into me as I trembled in his arms. Pleasure consumed every corner of my mind, burning up all the darkness as fire tore at my muscles. It felt like he was ripping my climax from my body, forcing my pleasure to spill out all over his hand.

"Oh my God." His teeth clenched against my neck. "You're so fucking perfect."

It was like our bodies were connected. I could feel all the

tension taking over his muscles as his rhythm stuttered. His hands dug into my flesh as they scrambled over my body, raking down my back, like he was trying to find something to hold onto as he fell over the edge of his climax.

I almost couldn't take how hard he pounded into me. Almost. He grunted into my ear as he poured himself into me, and I desperately wished there wasn't a condom between us. I wanted to feel the way he slicked me with his pleasure. I wanted to feel him so close—nothing between us.

His body still spasmed with aftershocks of pleasure as he collapsed into me, crushing me like the weight of a mountain, but I didn't want him to move. I didn't want him to give me any space to breathe. I didn't want him to let me go.

"I think I might be infatuated with you too," I murmured through the sex-haze clouding my mind.

A low laugh rumbled from his chest. "Didn't you say that was fucked up?" He buried his face in my hair so I could feel his hot breath and tight smile against my head.

"Yeah." I laughed too. I couldn't help it. My head floated above my body, and I wondered if that was what it was like to be on drugs. I finally understood why people got addicted.

He moved to untie me again.

"Don't." I exhaled, inhaled, soaking in his heat on top of me. "I just want to stay like this."

His exhale sounded like a groan. He lay his heavy head on my back and wrapped his arms around me, completely burying me in the warmth and softness of his body. I could have fallen asleep like that—crushed as I was by his enormousness. My arms ached from being elevated above my head for so long, but I didn't care. I didn't want to lose the feeling of being tied down under Cody.

Finally, after what felt like a glorious eternity, he kissed up my spine, slid his hands up my arms. "I have to eat. And as much as I'd like to leave you tied up here waiting for me, I think you need to eat too."

He kissed me as he untied my wrists without even looking at the knots.

"You're quite the boy scout," I said as he pulled away to release my ankles.

He laughed and kissed the back of my knees.

"Oh fuck, I like when you do that."

"I know." He kissed them again as he untied my ankles. He rubbed the sore skin where the fabric had worn at it without my noticing. I resisted the urge to wince as I moved. I didn't want him to see he'd left me sore. Didn't want him to think he needed to hold

back.

"C'mon." He lifted me in his arms. It felt like I was tied up again and I loved it. I loved being tied up in Cody.

Cody pushed me into the shower and rubbed soap all over me, stroking my shoulders, cupping my balls, kissing me under the stream of water. He still had that effortless command, but I wasn't trying to fight it anymore. I was starting to love the way he pushed me around, guided me, told me what to do. Maybe I was starting to trust him—really, really trust him—enough to eat a wild mushroom just on his promise that it wasn't poisonous.

Maybe I was starting to love his weird promises.

Chapter Sixteen
Don't Be Afraid to Get Wet

There must've been an entire ocean in the sky for all the rain dripping down. It poured off the roof in endless, relaxing rivers, making it even more impossible for Cody to pull me out of sleep as he kissed down my back, whispered in my ear, and eventually gave in to shaking me.

"Mmm, gotta wake up, baby." He nipped my ear a little too rough and tugged it between his teeth. "Mechanic called. Your car's ready to pick up."

"I thought it would take two weeks to fix." I swatted dozily at the air.

Cody laughed, whipped the covers back and kissed down my naked body, grazing his fingers over the backs of my knees. "It's been two weeks."

Had I really been with Cody for two weeks? It all felt like one long, breathless moment.

"No way it has." I snatched the covers back. "That would mean it's July. No way it's this cold in July."

"I'll build you a fire when we get back." He stole the covers away again. "Unless you want me to find some other way to keep you warm." He wrapped his arms around me and kissed over my back.

"Maybe you don't realize how cold it is." I pressed into his body heat. "If you grew up in Alaska."

"Do you think it snows every day in Alaska?"

"Doesn't it?"

Cody snorted, shaking his head. "Summers are as warm as anywhere."

"I'd hope they're warmer than this." I rolled over and buried

my face in his chest.

"I survived a Texas summer five years ago." His warmth was stolen from me as he sat up on the edge of the bed. "Never took the cold for granted again."

I rubbed my eye with the heal of my hand. "Why'd you leave Alaska if you love the cold so much?" When he didn't answer, I flicked his chin with my foot. "Huh? Why'd you leave?"

"Hoped I'd meet someone." His voice grew lower. "Got kinda lost on my way back."

"Did you try a map?" I pinched his soft hair between my toes and gave it a tug.

"Hah." He grabbed my foot and teased his fingers up the arch until I squirmed. "Sometimes it feels like I've been looking for you this whole time."

I forgot the coldness of the morning. It was all those stupid moments that made it so easy to fall for Cody; like slipping down a hillside; falling deeper and faster with every lost foothold.

"Now c'mon." He pulled my toe until the joint popped out a *crack*. "If you don't get up, I'm not making you breakfast."

"I'll make my own damned breakfast." I buried my face in the pillow.

"Yeah right." He laughed. "I've seen you make eggs."

"Mmm, fuck off."

"Geez you're cranky in the morning." He yanked on another toe.

"Sorry I don't like being made fun of for my lack of basic life-skills." I jerked my foot away from him, searching for the covers with my eyes closed. "I didn't exactly have the kind of parents who taught me how to cook, and fish, and tie boy scout knots."

"Shit, sorry." Cody grabbed me by the waist. "I didn't mean to be an ass, Trav. If you want, I'll teach you to cook." He ran his lips over my shoulders. "Or I could just teach you some knots." His breath seared against my ear. "I do a mean hog tie."

"Oh, fuck, I might take you up in that last one." I pressed into his body, stroking my ass against his bulge.

"Then you have to get up." He pulled away quickly, laughing. "Let's call that lesson a reward for good behaviour."

"Fuck off."

"You know you swear a lot when you're sleepy? You swear a lot in your sleep, too."

"Do not."

"Sure you do, but it's usually *fuck me, fuck me, please.*"

"Fuck off." I pulled the covers back over my body and stared out the window before closing my eyes. "Mmm, I fucking hate rain."

“Your birthday's in February, right? You were born under a water sign. You should love rain.”

“You’re into astrology?”

“Kinda just into everything.” He shrugged.

“You’d think a shrink wouldn’t touch that garbage.”

“Hah.” He tore the pillow out from under my head and smacked me with it. “Out of bed, or you’re going to starve.”

I stretched as I rose. It wasn’t really the cold in the air keeping me in bed. It was the cold slithering feeling in the pit of my stomach at the thought of leaving to pick up my car.

Cody stopped for coffee in town, because coffee seemed to be the only thing he didn’t know how to make. Said his always came out too bitter, whatever that meant.

My stomach twisted uneasily as we waited in line. Axel had friends everywhere. Was he still looking for me? Cody pressed his strong palm to the back of my neck, putting an end to my nervous glancing. No wonder he’d become a therapist. He could calm people with just his presence. We walked through the rain, back out to the car, and I tried to keep my anxiety down. It was easier with him beside me. Easier. Not easy—but easier.

“You okay?” Cody took my hand as he pulled up to a beat up little garage. My car sat outside, fixed, but still full of memories.

“Mhmm.”

“You know you can tell me if something’s bothering you. Don’t try to keep it in.”

“Are you sure you want me to stay with you?” I chewed my lip. “You don’t want me to give you some space now that my car’s fixed?”

“If you’re telling me you’re thinking about driving off, I might have to bust out that hogtie right now, because there is no way I’m letting you leave.”

“Don’t joke.”

“Who says I’m joking?”

I pulled my feet up onto the seat and hid my face in my knees.

“What’s wrong?”

Hold it the fuck together.

I squeezed my arms around my face to hide the sob creeping up my throat. Guys aren’t supposed to lose it like this. Not supposed to fall to pieces just from looking at a fucking car.

“Hey, don’t hide from me.” Cody tried to move my arm from my face.

“Fuck off.”

His warm breath brushed my ear. “Why are you crying?”

“I’m not crying.”

"Yeah you are." He nuzzled my ear with his nose. "You don't have to hide from me. My sign's Scorpio, so I love water. Cry all you want."

A laugh strangled the sob in my throat.

"Why're you crying, baby?"

"I don't know." I rubbed my sleeve across my face. "I feel so fucking stupid."

"It's not stupid to cry." He lifted my chin and kissed me. "Sometimes everything gets too heavy. You gotta let it fall."

I exhaled shakily and everything fell. I folded into Cody's body and he held me as I lost control of everything I couldn't hold inside.

"You wanna talk about anything?" He grazed his fingers up and down my neck.

I shook my head against his throat, and he held me until the heavy patter of rain slowed to a drizzle. I pulled away and wiped my nose on my sleeve.

"Thanks…"

"I just wanna catch everything you can't hold onto." Cody popped open the glove compartment and pulled out a pack of tissues. I stared down into the mess of papers and insurance forms as he passed me a tissue.

"Is that a gun?"

"Been a lot of animals creeping outside the house." He shut the glove compartment quickly and wiped the back of his hand across my face. "But I don't want you to worry about it. You're safe with me."

"Have you considered living somewhere that isn't infested with bears and killer-goats?" A wet chuckle rose from my throat.

"Where's the fun in that?"

I laughed, rubbing the tissue across my face, trying to destroy any evidence that I'd broken open like a worn out dam.

"Why don't you wait out here. I'll go in and get your keys."

"I feel bad that you're paying for this—for everything."

"Well, something tells me you're not going to spend the money you got sitting in that beat up envelope at home." He handed me another tissue. "And truth is, I like taking care of you."

"Could you make me feel any more helpless?"

"Life just gave you too much to handle. And you don't have to handle it on your own."

My heart squeezed and expanded in aching throbs.

"I'm going to repay you for all this."

"You don't owe me a damn thing."

"I owe you everything."

"Then I owe you that much and more." Cody brushed his lips over mine. "Just wait here." He kissed me before running out through

the rain into the garage.

How could I repay someone for saving my life and giving me a thousand new reasons to live? Good thing Cody didn't think I owed him anything, because there was no way that debt could ever be settled.

A few minutes later, he came back out to the car soaking wet and tossed my keys to me. "Try not to crash into my shit this time."

"I'll try." I grinned back. "But not very hard."

I took a deep breath as I got out and walked towards my car. *Hold it together.* Climbing behind the driver's seat was like being torn between the past and the present. Memories flooded my brain as I followed Cody down the muddy road.

Maddy should've been in the passenger seat the night I left.

I tried to keep my eyes focused on Cody's SUV. Maddy's high pitched cry still burned in my ears. I just focused on Cody in front of me. Focused on Cody. It didn't make the pain any less, but it made it easier to ignore.

We passed the shoe-tree, and in the muddy light, the hanging boots and sneakers made it look more like a gallows than ever. Almost home. I tried to keep my hands steady as I fixed my eyes in front of me.

'*What are you doing, Trav? What are you doing? You're scaring me. What are you doing?'*

I'd grabbed her by the wrist and begged her to come with me, and she'd only looked more terrified. Had she ever believed I was taking the money for her?

Rain crashed against my windshield too fast for my wipers to clear away. I could only see his tail lights in front of me, but that was all I needed to see. I just needed to know he was there.

There was just enough room in Cody's garage for both of us to park between the mangled jalopies he thought he could fix. I was a mess as I got out of my car. I wanted to collapse. Who gets that strung out from a simple fucking errand?

"Sit." Cody pushed me into the chair he'd dragged out there two weeks ago. "Talk about what's bothering you."

"I don't even know." I squeezed my temples, my head aching from all the fucking rain pounding against the roof of the garage. "I don't even know what I'm feeling. Just that it's-it's-it's too much."

"You're trying too hard to fight your feelings. You're gonna hurt yourself." He crouched in front of me and put his forehead to mine. "Let it out."

"Goddamnit, Cody." I collapsed against him as everything spilled over again. With just a touch, Cody could reach inside me and pour out all my emotions until he should've drowned in them, but he

just kept swimming towards me, trying to pull me out of the storm.

We sat out there with all his broken junk until the painful waves stopped crashing against me. He didn't try to make me talk, just took me inside and nestled into the couch beside me. Just sitting beside him watching T.V. or reading made the shattered mess inside of me hurt less. Just knowing he was there. Would always be there. When dinner time came, he made good on his promise to teach me how to cook, showing me how to make the stir-fry he prepared for dinner. Then he made good on his other promise.

Wrists and ankles bound behind my back, I begged for him with gasped, choking breaths. I'd never known a man could have his stamina. His body was just so generous; he gave me everything he had.

I fell asleep twisted up in his sweaty arms, both of us too exhausted to wash the slickness from our skin. Rain drummed on the roof, lulling us into a satisfied coma.

Pounding broke the soft patter of the rain. I bolted upright, heart hammering. Cody pushed me back into the bed.

"It's only someone at the door."

"What time is it?" I rubbed my eyes.

"Just go back to sleep." He rose quickly as the pounding grew louder.

"Should we call the cops?"

"Probably just a client." He dressed quickly in the soft moonlight as the banging increased. "People have all kinds of emergencies at night."

"You give your clients your home address?"

"There's nothing to worry about, okay?"

"Cody?" I sat up again. "Will you get your gun out of the car before you go to the door?"

"I don't want you to be scared."

"You don't realize how dangerous the people you work with can be." I grabbed for his hand in the dark. "Please Cody. I want you to be careful."

"Mmm, okay I'll take the gun." He teased his fingers in mine. "But only in case I run into a bear—or a goat."

"Please don't joke."

"I'm not." Cody kissed my head and pushed me back into the bed. "Promise me you'll stay in bed." He exhaled a shaky laugh. "Don't want you cranky in the morning. I hate hearing you curse."

My eyes drooped painfully. Even if I didn't want to listen to him, I wasn't sure if I had a choice.

"Be careful," I murmured.

"I'm always careful."

The door closed. Voices. Outside. One angry. The other a calm hum. Cody always stayed calm. The murmur soothed me in and out of the ebb of sleep. That voice could make me forget my own name.

no

I bolted up. I shouldn't have let him go to the door in the middle of the fucking night by himself. He had no idea. My heart hammered against my chest. Guilt overwhelmed me as I remembered the piece of shit from the hospital. I'd never told Cody the truth about him—that he was part of the drug dealing scum that Axel ran around with. Those people weren't just dangerous. They were deadly.

What if someone like that was at the door?

Cody's voice disappeared.

Fuck.

I shouldn't have let him. Shouldn't have let him. I threw the covers back and scrambled through the dark. Hot panic gripped me as I pushed on the bedroom door. It hit something solid as it swung open.

"Ow, fuck." Cody stumbled back. "You tryna kill me, Trav?" He groaned as he rubbed his face. "Thought I told you to stay in bed."

Relief swept over me. Then guilt. "I'm sorry. I got freaked out."

He kept rubbing his face. "Gah, you're so clumsy."

"I'm sorry." I touched his cheek and he flinched away.

"Why didn't you stay in bed?" He sounded irritated as he led me back under the covers.

"I don't like that you let your clients come to your house in the middle of the night. It's not safe. The people you work with have problems. *Serious* problems."

"It's okay." He pulled me into his body. His heart thumped hard and fast against his chest. "This guy just needed to be talked down. That's all. He was just upset about how I spoke to a friend of his."

"You want to see the best in people so bad, I think you overlook the worst." I resisted the urge to chew my lip. "I didn't tell you the truth about the guy at the hospital."

"Hm?"

"He said he was part of the Skull Band. Cody, those are the drug dealers Axel works with. Some of the people you try to help don't just have issues—they're bad people."

"I don't like to think of anyone as a bad person." He was quiet for a bit. "Sometimes people just fuck up."

"Some of these people could hurt you. Do you fucking understand that?"

"I'm starting to." He paused again. "I promise I'll be more careful."

I rolled over and pressed my back into him. “I had a nightmare.”

“What’d you dream, baby?” He kissed up and down my neck.

“Dreamed I shot you.”

“Well, I doubt you know how to use a gun, so the chances of that actually happening are pretty low.”

“Hmm, true.” I found his hand in the dark. “Scares me though. Don’t ever want to hurt you.”

“You never need to be scared with me.” He squeezed his arms around me. “Ever.”

Cody had no idea how much there was to be afraid of. And I hoped he’d never know. I’d keep him safe. I’d keep him…

I woke to the sunrise creeping across his face, illuminating the two dark bruises marking his eye and jaw.

“Oh God.” My stomach twisted sickeningly. “Did I do that?”

“Mmm, what?” Cody shifted with his eyes closed.

I touched the purplish skin on his chin. It looked so painful. I’d wanted to protect him.

He grabbed my hand and moved it from his face. “Just walked into some shit in the dark. Not your fault.”

“I’m so sorry.” I stood quickly.

“I said it wasn’t your fault. Where are you going?”

“I’m going downstairs to get ice for you—how do you know those bruises aren’t from when I slammed the door into your face?”

“Because I said so.” He held my hand tight. “I don’t want you to keep talking about it. It bothers me when you get all mixed up.”

“Sorry.”

“And stop apologizing.” He pinched my nose. “Or no breakfast.”

I swatted his hand away. “Think I’m gonna make breakfast so you can’t keep using that threat.”

“Then I’ll have to find something else to get you out of bed.” He grabbed me by the waist and pushed me into the bed, his arms wrapping so tight around me, I could hardly move. I tried to avoid looking at the ugly marks on his skin. Tried to pretend I didn’t know he was lying. When his lips slid over mine, it became so easy to swallow everything he said.

Chapter Seventeen
Messing Around

Cody had begun the slow process of cracking me open, pouring out everything slimy and nasty inside of me, and filling me with something beautiful.

The thunder moved on and was replaced by hot summer nights where we could have filled mountain lakes with all the sweat spilled between us. I spilled everything for him—and he, as always, cleaned us both off with his tender hands.

Another week went by, and then another, and then I lost track of how long I'd been there as I forgot there was ever a time when I spent every night scared and huddled in my car.

I sat in the comfy chair Cody had dragged out to the garage, my legs tucked up under me. Even though the air boiled the sweat dripping down my skin, I had the blanket nestled around my legs. Sometimes it just felt good to have something to hide in as Cody forced my secrets out of me, exposing me in ways I hadn't thought possible.

"—here's where it all comes back to how scared you are," he said without looking up from under the hood of the car. He twisted hard on a wrench, his muscles bulging. "Remember last week when we were talking about how you tried to keep me away, because you were scared?"

"Yeah."

"That's what it always comes back to. You think you're angry, but you're not. You're scared. It's why you lose control. You're afraid and you can't control yourself with all the terror flooding your brain."

"I don't know if that's true."

"Who's the expert here, me or you?"

"Well, you're definitely not an expert mechanic." I snorted. "Glad I didn't let you fix my car, because it would still be busted if I had."

He grinned from behind his thick beard and yanked harder on the wrench. "So what are you so scared of?"

"I don't know." I picked at a loose thread on the blanket.

"That's not true."

"I guess." I shifted the blanket around me. "I'm afraid of everything falling to shit… but it already has, so I don't know why I'm still scared."

"You're afraid of being hurt." He threw the wrench in his toolbox.

"I guess that's true." It felt strange to admit something like that, but with Cody, I could say anything. Nothing inside me felt *bad* like it used to. I didn't feel like I needed to shove things down and deny them.

"The thing is, Trav..." He crumpled a rag in his hands and

rubbed it along his filthy fingers. “You’re going to get hurt. That’s life. You just have to go with it.” He threw the rag back to the ground. “Pain is part of life, and that’s not what you want to hear, but it’s true. If you don’t relax, it’s just going to hurt more.” He bit his plump lip to hold back his grin. “Imagine if I were to spank you. Wouldn’t it hurt more if you were to tense up in anticipation?”

I tensed up just at the thought, then looked away from his swollen biceps. “I don’t think that’s the same thing.”

“You wanna bet?” His eyes crinkled, but his grin was all wickedness.

“I’ve never been a gambler.” I looked down and bit my lip to keep from smiling. “Risks aren’t my thing.”

I couldn’t help watching him as he stepped towards me His sleeveless T-shirt was cut low in the arms, giving me an indecent view of his muscle bound ribcage, and the way his pants hung beltless from his waist was just begging for him to make a wrong move, sending them tumbling down his thighs. Cody was a risk-taker—to be sure.

He gripped my wrist. “C’mere.”

My heart *pattered* in my chest as I trailed after him out to the deck. The blasting sun drew a fresh bead of sweat from my forehead. Even the chickens had gone silent in the heat, having disappeared somewhere in the shady trees.

Cody put his hands on my hips and pushed me forward until I was pressed against his punching bag.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m showing you something.” He teased my belt open, sliding it from the loops.

“What are you showing me? My own dick?”

A small growl rumbled in his chest and squeezed out of his throat. At some point I’d realized that was the noise he made when he was trying not to laugh.

“Just relax.” He peeled my shirt over my head. “Stand still.”

He pulled my wrists around the punching bag so that I was hugging it, my cheek pressed against the worn fabric. The sun had baked it all morning and it was almost too hot to touch.

“What are you showing me?” I asked again as he slid the belt around my wrists and pulled it tight, trapping my arms. “Is this going to hurt?”

“Yes.”

My balls pulled up to my body as my skin prickled. He circled me silently, pressed into my back and teased his fingers into my waistband. He put his soft lips against my ear and murmured, “I’m showing you that you don’t need to be afraid of getting hurt.”

“What?”

“Relax,” he breathed in my ear, then pushed on my boxers, taking them down my thighs with my pants. They tangled around my ankles, restricting my movements.

His chest pushed against my back with every heavy breath. His hands stroked over my ass, drawing up goosebumps from the skin. “I’m going to spank you.”

Something tingled up my spine. Maybe it was fear, maybe it was excitement. Cody’s strong hands kneaded my ass, his thumb sliding between my cheeks, his fingers stroking the curves.

I felt his tongue on my ear as he licked his lips. “Are you ready?”

“Is this some kind of negative reinforcement thing?”

He shook his head against the back of my neck, smearing his sweat into my own. “It’s not about punishment. It’s about learning to feel good even when things hurt.”

I felt him growing hard against me. Was this turning him on? The thought made my fear irrelevant; I wanted Cody to touch my body however he liked.

“Are you ready?”

My shoulders stiffened. I nodded.

“Relax, baby.”

My cock throbbed every time that name left his lips. His ownership felt so complete. He could call me whatever he wanted and he knew it.

I closed my eyes and nodded again. Swallowed. Thought about his strong arms and big hands and how hard they might come down against my skin.

“Relax.” His thumb teased closer and closer to my entrance, the eagerness in his touch exposing how much he savoured my vulnerability. I wanted to give him more to savour. I wanted to give him everything he asked for.

He pressed into me so that my sweaty skin stuck against the fabric of the punching bag. I took slow breaths, trying not to think about all the muscle pushing against me. Cody wouldn’t hurt me. I knew that.

I nodded again. “I’m ready.”

My words turned into a shocked groan as his hand came down on me. It didn’t hurt, but sent tingling shocks through my skin. My cock twitched and throbbed at the rough contact and I pushed back into him. He did it harder, without warning. Heat spread across my skin, but it still wasn’t quite pain. I was feeling Cody’s strength in a whole new way.

“This one’s going to hurt,” he breathed against my neck, running his nose down the bumps of my spine. His hand came down

before I had a chance to register what he'd said.

Pain stung across my ass. My back arched. A groan exploded from my lips. I clenched my fists.

"Just relax." His gushing breath rustled my hair. His hard cock pressed against my thighs as he massaged my shoulders, forcing the tension out of them. "This is going to hurt again."

I wasn't listening. I was just soaking up all the need radiating out of Cody. My balls pulled up tight to my body as his palm slapped against my ass. My knees weakened and all my strength disappeared for one instant when sensation and desire overwhelmed me. Only Cody's strength held me upright.

"See?" He groaned into my neck. He manhandled my ass cheeks, groping and squeezing the throbbing skin. "See how it feels better when you relax?"

I shook my head. He spanked me again. Harder. A moan poured out of the depths of my throat. My back straightened as all my muscles tensed. Cody stopped and, teased his fingers down my back, kissed my hair, stroked the tightened muscles below my back.

"Relax," he ordered. "Just let it happen."

He rubbed my ass in slow circles, and I knew another one was coming. I breathed. In. Out. Let myself relax into him.

smack

The blow was so hard, it forced the air out of my lungs. Sweat dripped between us. Cody breathed against my neck in hard, forced gushes.

"That's it."

A whimper left my lips. I didn't clench. Didn't flinch. Even when it hurt, the way he possessed my body left me aching for him.

"Relax," he murmured in my ear.

"I can't." I moaned, shoving my bare ass against him as a throbbing twitch ran through my cock. "You make me want you so bad it hurts."

"Mmm, that's not the kind of pain I want you to feel." He gripped my hips, the excitement in his fingers forcing them to dig into my skin. "Better give you what you need." He dropped to his knees, his lips finding the most sore spots on my skin. Searing kisses sent aching need throbbing through me.

smack

Hot pain melted into everything else pulsing under my skin. My thighs quivered, but I didn't tense. Cody wet his finger and stroked it against my ring, making it even harder for me to tell what was supposed to be pain and what was supposed to be pleasure as he slid inside, slowly invading me. He opened me up with another wet finger. I groaned and bucked towards him, but he put another strong arm

against my ass, holding me still.

smack

I couldn't distinguish pain from pleasure. It was all one intense pressure boiling under my skin. Cody moaned into his wet kisses as he fingered me so slow it was almost torture. His lips trailed down the back of my legs to caress the soft skin behind my knees. The twitching throb in my cock made me want to ease back onto his fingers, force them into me, hard and fast, but I couldn't fight Cody's easy control.

smack

"See?" He groaned. "See how good that can feel?"

I bit my lip and nodded, whimpering a moan as he drew his fingers from me. He kissed up my back, licking at the sweat dripping down my neck.

He groaned, gripping my ass so hard my cheeks pulled apart. I felt so exposed when he did that. Opened up. Vulnerable. I loved giving him my vulnerability.

He took his wallet from his pocket and pulled out a condom, rolling it over his cock, and squeezing lube onto his fingers from a disposable packet. The cool liquid felt so good as he stroked it over me, teased it inside of me. He rubbed his hand down his shaft before pushing it between my cheeks. My breath shuddered out of my chest as he pressed against me, stretching me *slowly,* making me feel the aching pressure of being filled. His groan came out in an explosion of hot air against my neck as his hips connected with my raw, stinging ass. He gripped my pelvis, pulled back, and collided into me. The punching bag groaned on its chain as Cody thrust into me again.

Completely trapped. Helpless. Begging to stay that way forever.

My fists clenched, forcing my wrists to push against the leather belt restraining them as Cody buried himself inside of me, stretching me deeper and deeper, forcing pleasure to rip up my spine. I couldn't even wipe away the sweat dripping down my skin as his hips packed against my ass.

smack

My muscles melted as he clutched my burning ass in his palm. His groans poured out against my skin as he brushed searing kisses over my shoulders. His cock stroked the hot pack of nerves inside me again, and again until I exploded. Rivers of cum gushed from me as I became so breathless, I couldn't even scream. All that pressure just sat in my chest, expanding me beyond what I could take. The earth pulsed and throbbed and all I felt was Cody pounding into me as he forced me to feel so much pleasure that my body couldn't contain it.

Cody stroked his hand over my slickened cock and brought his fingers to his lips. A quake ran through his body and then I felt him

tip over the edge. He moaned out the words he always said when he came. The ones that still knocked the strength from my knees.

"You're so fucking perfect."

He sucked in a sharp breath that stole the air from my lungs. His whole body shook like an earthquake as he came inside of me.

He pulled out slowly, leaving me feeling empty and full all at once. I gripped the punching bag for support as he unbound my hands. My legs felt liquid. I dropped to the ground. Cody tugged the condom off, tossing it on the deck, and sat down beside me.

"Do you fuck all your patients like that?" I asked, my head swimming as I pulled my clothes back on.

"I told you, I don't fuck." Cody snorted. "And I can only think of a couple situations more fucked up than a therapist fucking their patient."

"But I mean… you don't right?" I looked to the condom quietly dripping on the deck. "I mean, I'm the only patient you fuck, right?"

"I don't really like when you call yourself that." Cody stroked his earlobe between his thumb and forefinger as he stared out at the mess of trees. "You're not my patient, Trav."

"It's what it feels like to me—" I stopped, realizing Cody had distracted me from my question. "What I'm asking is, are we together? Are we exclusive? Is it just me and you?"

He looked at me, his eyes crinkling as a grin spread behind his beard. "It's just me and you."

"Oh." Something warm spread through me that stole my train of thought for a moment. "I just meant... I mean..." I looked at the condom again. Embarrassment weighed my tongue down. "I mean, if we're exclusive…"

"Ah!" Cody followed my gaze to the condom and made that growling noise in his throat. "You're saying you want my bare cock inside you, aren't you?"

"Your bear cock?" I raised an eyebrow. "Are you trying to tell me you're a werebear?"

He burst out laughing. Squeezed his arm around me. Nipped my ear. "If you want me to fuck you bare, you just need to ask."

"I want you to fuck me, *bear*."

He laughed again, running his nose along my neck. "Trav, I am completely and utterly infatuated with you."

"Is that okay, though? I mean, if we were to have sex without the condoms?"

"Fine by me. I've got a clean bill of health. You?"

"Oh, uh, probably."

"What do you mean probably?"

"I mean, there's only really been you, and one girl I dated, but,

umm, she and I always used…" I dropped my eyes to the condom.

"But you've never had a physical?"

I shook my head. "I haven't been to a doctor since I was a kid. Except the time you took me."

"Thank God you're letting me take care of you." He squeezed my shoulders. "Remind me to book you an appointment before you succumb to consumption."

The thought of going back to the doctor in that town made me nervous. They'd kept a record of me visiting. Axel knew I'd been kicking around the area, and I knew all too well he had friends there. It was stupid to be worried. Of course Axel had no way of knowing I'd been to the doctor, and no way of knowing I'd go back, but it put a little seed of fear in my stomach anyways.

"I was just teasing." Cody stroked his hands over my tense muscles. "I'm sure you're not dying, but I want you to see a doctor anyways. I want to know you're being taken care of."

I didn't tell him that wasn't what was worrying me. He put one arm under my knees and the other behind my shoulders, scooping me up into him. He carried me into the house and laid me on the couch.

"Was what we did okay?"

I nodded. "You're definitely fond of unconventional therapy methods."

He ran his fingers through my hair. "I just wanted you to see that you don't need to be afraid of pain. Life is always going to hurt, but you just have to go with it, accept the pain as it comes. If you fight it, it's only going to tear you apart."

"I don't mean to be rude, Cody," I teased my lip with my tongue. "But I think this might be one of those times where you act like you know what you're talking about, but you don't really."

"What do you mean?" He sounded disappointed—or was that something else?

"I mean, what do you know about getting hurt? Your life has been this amazing dream of camping all over the continent with your amazing parents, and being a rich therapist. Just because you learned what to say to people like me, doesn't mean you know what pain is like."

His brows closed in as he looked away from me to stare at the book shelf. He rubbed the back of his head and sighed.

"Look, I probably should have told you this a long time ago..." He exhaled slowly, his eyebrows pressing inward. "I just didn't know when to bring it up."

"Okay." I couldn't stop my heart from pounding against my chest. He looked uncertain and that unnerved me. "What is it?"

"Well, Trav, how do I say this? I know how you feel, because I

know what it's like to be you." He paused, watched my expression, and then said, "I was in foster care until I was eight."

I sucked in a breath, wondering if Cody could feel it in his chest the way I always felt his sharp inhales. I wanted to say something, but all I could think of was *that sucks,* so I just put my arm around his shoulders.

"So I know what it's like to have that… confusion. To feel rejected and not good enough, and completely scared, and not know why."

It was like his powerful hands were pressing down on bruises I hadn't known were there.

"I know what it's like to have never heard, *I love you."* He put his hand to my face and goose bumps prickled all over my body. "I know what it's like to not even know what that means."

I finally found my voice. "I'm sorry about what I said."

"Don't go beating yourself up over that, too." He looked down from my eyes. "I should've told you."

"I wish you had." My chest ached. After all I'd complained about my life, Cody's life had been so much harder.

"I wasn't trying to hide it from you." He exhaled a long, heavy sigh. "I just didn't know how you would react."

"You thought you couldn't tell me?"

"Didn't want to see you upset."

"It upsets me that you felt you needed to keep your pain to yourself after you've done so much to help me."

"I don't have any grief about my adoption." He toyed with a lock of hair sticking to his sweaty temple. "I came to terms with that a long time ago. Had an amazing childhood. There were a couple bumps that sucked, but that's life, right?"

He kissed me slowly, sliding his lips over mine before slipping his tongue into my mouth. I tried to push back against his tongue and get inside his mouth, but he was so much more experienced than me; he stole all the power from my body with so little effort.

"Shit, what time is it?" He pulled away.

"How would I know?"

"Mmm." He kissed me one more time, his eyes darting up to the clock on the wall. "I gotta go."

I grabbed onto his hand as he pulled away. "Can we talk about this when you get back?"

"There's not much to talk about." He wiped a sweaty forearm across his forehead. "I can tell you about my parents. How amazing they are."

"I think I already know how amazing your parents are."

"Then I don't know what else to tell you." He pulled away.

"You'll have to scrounge for your own dinner." He slipped his boots on by the front door. "Sorry, I lost track of time."

"I can cook for myself."

"That's not true." His wink still made my face so hot. "But there's some salmon from last night left over in the fridge."

I wiped a dabble of sweat from my forehead before I stood to kiss him goodbye. Without air conditioning, Cody's house was so hot, I thought he might be trying to cook *me* for dinner.

I could have driven into town and found some cool place to lay low until the night brought some relief from the heat, but I didn't really feel safe going out on my own, and I still didn't like being in my car. Too many memories.

Cody gripped my waist and pulled me into him, kissing me hard, so I knew how bad he wanted to stay there with me.

"I kinda like that you can't cook." He grinned against my lips. "I love cooking for you."

Sweat dripped down my neck as he said *see ya later* and slammed the door.

Chapter Eighteen
Leaps of Faith

Cody had slammed the door so hard it'd bounced back open. I shut it quickly before bugs swarmed inside. Then I realized he'd also left the patio doors open when he'd carried me into the house. I closed them with a heavy *thud* that sent the punching bag rocking, groaning on its chain like it was trying to tell me how unbearable the heat was out there. Oh God. The suffocating humidity in the air made a fever feel like a cold bath. I leaned my head against the glass and watched the bag swing in the heat, like it was trying to squirm free so it could find a dark rock to crawl under.

Everything Cody had confessed to me flooded my brain at once, until I had no idea what I was feeling, let alone thinking.

He'd left the stereo playing. It was that opera piece written by the dying guy. He hadn't been kidding when he'd said he loved it. He listened to it almost every day. Usually while he abused the poor punching bag. One night I told him I was going to cut the chain on the bag and set it free, so it wouldn't have to suffer his torture anymore.

Foster care.

Growing up, that had always been the big threat. My mom would tell me and my sister that if we were bad, the police would

come and take us to foster care; if we told anyone how our parents argued; if we told anyone we were hungry; if we cried. I'd grown up thinking it must be the worst thing in the world.

I'd really wanted to believe that only wonderful things had ever happened to Cody, but maybe that had always been a stupid lie to tell myself. Cody was just like everyone else. Life happens to everyone.

A mosquito pierced my skin, forcing me to jerk. Blood splattered as its full belly exploded under my blow.

"Sorry, buddy," I said to the obliterated bug as I rubbed my hand over my arm to get some of the blood off. "Didn't see you there."

Sometimes I got tired of the heat, the bugs, and the killer-goats. I needed to be able to think. I turned off Cody's music and wilted to the kitchen sink to wash the blood off my arm.

Bits of wing and leg scraped off under my fingernails. Somewhere out in Cody's death-forest, the dead mosquito's babies were waiting for their mother to come home to them. Cody had told me only female mosquitoes drink blood to feed their larvae—or was it to make eggs? The point was that she was dead and now her babies were going to die too. I apologized again.

I shut the water off and paced aimlessly, trying to understand everything crashing down on me. It felt like I'd been lost in the same thoughts for hours when I stopped in the living room. The shelf full of books on broken homes and childhood trauma took on a completely new dimension. Was that why Cody had gotten into psychology? Was he trying to understand all the scars he'd been left with? Was Cody trying to fix himself?

I backed away from the shelf, because it felt like I was looking at something too personal. All that pain left out on display. *Histories of Complex Trauma*, *Broken Attachments, Emotional Recovery*.

He'd said there was nothing to talk about. Could that be true? Had Cody's adoptive parents really made up for all the pain and confusion of his childhood? I pressed my lips together. He definitely didn't seem scarred and ruined like I felt some days.

My stomach growled. Cody would be hungry when he got home. He hated stopping for food. Said fast food tasted fake.

The raw, dripping flesh that had filled the fridge when I'd first arrived at Cody's house was gone—he hadn't bought meat since the night he buried his steak. Leftover salmon sat in a Tupperware with baked potatoes. It would've made a decent dinner for just me, but I had an urge to cook something. I wasn't sure if it was because I wanted to take care care of Cody, or to prove him wrong about my culinary abilities.

I pulled peppers and other green things out of the crisper. He'd

shown me how to make stir-fry. Said it was idiot proof.

I found a bag of shrimp in the freezer, rice in the cupboard. Yeah, idiot proof. Cody would be eating his words for dinner.

The pot of rice boiled over while I sliced the peppers. The stove hissed, a burnt starchy smell filling the air. I stirred the rice, because the directions on the package didn't say what to do when the pot sizzled and spat like a witch's cauldron. I tucked my nose into my shirt. Definitely never smelled like that when Cody cooked. When he cooked, it just smelled… perfect.

It was stupid, to think I could accomplish anything with my shitty cooking, but I guess I was trying to reach through time and take that lost, confused child in my arms. Tell him… tell him… well, I guess I wanted to tell him he was loved.

The shrimp fell in the pan in a frozen block. Fuck. Probably needed to be defrosted first. I jabbed them with a fork until they broke apart, turning pink as the ice around them melted. The rice stuck to the bottom of the pot as I scraped it into the pan with the shrimp. Idiot proof.

I dropped the chopped vegetables into the stir-fry and remembered there were supposed to be… spices that went in it. Soy sauce. That was it. I found it in the fridge and doused the concoction in it. Idiot proof.

Heat radiated from the pan, making the sweat drip down my neck even faster. The food *looked* okay as I stirred it around. The burnt rice smell still permeated the air, but I was tempted to feel proud of my work.

I tasted the meal.

Idiot.

Maybe Cody would get fast food after all. I flicked the element off. Hopefully he wouldn't notice a missing bag of shrimp or the burnt rice smell.

I was carrying the pan to the trash can when the front door creaked open and slammed shut.

"It is hot as balls out there." Cody groaned, stopping as he saw what I was doing.

"Oh, uh, hey," I said, rushing to the trash to hide the nasty, spoiled food.

Cody's head quirked to the side as a half smile spread across his face. "Did you make dinner?"

"I made something."

He glanced at the pan of burnt-ish rice and back up at my face. "Thought you wanted me to stop putting my life in danger."

"Shut up."

His smile disappeared. "Sorry, I meant, let's eat. I'm starving."

I just rolled my eyes and opened the trash can.

"Hey!" Cody snatched the pan from me, spilling half the contents on the floor. "I'm, going to eat *you* if you throw my dinner in the trash."

"I'd probably taste a lot better than than my cooking."

"Probably." Cody nipped my neck. "But maybe I'll save you for dessert."

My cock twitched as small moan stuttered out of my lips. Cody grinned, pulling away. He threw two plates on the table and piled them high with my sad efforts. The only thing he'd be full of after dinner would be regret.

I sat across from him as he shoved a huge forkful of food into his mouth. The way he swallowed made me wonder if he had strep again.

"Don't say I didn't warn you." I dropped my gaze. "Sorry. I really wanted to do it right."

"It's good." Cody stuffed his mouth full again. Maybe he just couldn't taste the the burnt, salty rice, because his smile was so fucking sweet.

"Just needs ketchup." He grabbed a bottle from the fridge and smothered his food in it. "Only ingredient you forgot. Stir-fry always needs ketchup."

A laugh squeezed up from the bottom of my stomach. Cody's mixture looked even more disgusting as he devoured it ravenously.

"No way I'm eating this." I pushed my plate away.

"More for me." Cody snatched my plate and dumped the 'food' onto his own.

My smile spread so wide my cheeks ached.

After I'd eaten the leftover salmon, and Cody had gulped down two plates of what was probably poison, we sprawled out on the leather furniture and tried not to melt into it.

"What about that dessert you promised me?" Cody licked his lips.

I tossed a squishy throw pillow at his head. "I never promised you anything."

"You make a guy dinner and no dessert? That ain't right."

"It's too hot for the kind of dessert you have in mind."

"Mmm, then let's go swimming." He peeled his shirt over his head, and any resistance I had to that idea was melted by the sight of his muscled chest glistening under a film of sweat. His phone went off in his pocket. He looked at the caller I.D. and chucked the phone to the couch, frowning.

"I don't have a swimsuit," I thought out loud.

"Swimsuit?" He shook his head, his stern expression dissolving

into a grin. “Nah.”

He grabbed me around the waist and threw me over his shoulder. I squirmed just to tease him, but really, I loved the way he picked me up whenever he wanted. I mean, once I’d gotten over how weird it was for a guy to do that. The piano notes of his ringtone faded as he pushed the door open and slammed it shut behind us.

Clouds of mosquitos and horseflies buzzed around us as Cody hauled me, through the death-forest. The chickens snapped at the air, feasting on the bugs that were feasting on us.

I supported my chin on my elbows and watched the way Cody’s ass flexed as he scrambled through the trees and rocks, carrying me like he was a wild man—because he was.

We weren’t walking over dirt anymore. Cody’s footsteps stomped over wood as he dragged me to the end of a dock that hung out over the nastiest excuse for a lake I’d ever seen. Couldn’t even call it a pond. Even hole seemed to glamourize it in a way it didn’t deserve. Maybe it was *large* enough to be a small lake, but it was completely disgusting. It was deep enough that the water looked black, but it must’ve been a lot higher years ago, because the dock sat about ten feet above the waterline. Dead trees jutted out from the surface, like the spot used to be a valley in the forest that had been flooded, and was draining its way out.

“Is this where you hide the bodies?” I laughed.

“What bodies?” He frowned. “Oh, hah, you’re trying to make a joke.” He slapped my ass, making me jolt in his arms. “Too bad you’re not funny.”

“You can’t be serious about swimming in here.”

“Why not?” He undid the button on his jeans and slid them down his hips. No underwear either. Daring *and* cheeky.

“This water is disgusting.”

He laughed, long and loud, like I’d made another joke. He stepped out of his jeans and turned his tight bare ass to me. He glanced over his shoulder, grinning as he caught my stare. He stretched his arms and gave his knees a bend.

“You’re not seriously jumping in tha—” I was cut off by the enormous splash Cody’s body made as it hit the water. I leapt back, like that toxic black sludge could melt my skin. Cody’s laugh echoed around me.

The hole must have been deeper than it looked, because he hadn’t broken his ass jumping into it. He lay out on his back, gently moving his arms to propel himself through the water. I could smell it, and it wasn’t exactly a bad smell, but it was wild and mossy. Definitely not the country club pool.

“That feels good.” His sigh turned into a long groan. He closed

his eyes and floated along the surface. A breeze drifted through the trees, shaking leaves down into the water. Cody opened an eye. “You comin’ in?”

“Are you kidding?”

“You’re the one with all the lame jokes.” He swept his arms down, moving himself lazily through the lake. I half-expected to see an enormous tentacle curl around his waist and pull him down into the water.

“Just jump,” he called up.

I felt that tug. The one that made me want to do whatever Cody said.

“Take your pants off, pretty boy.” He let out a low whistle.

The sun was fading, but the air was still hot as ever. Another small breeze rustled the trees, and smoke reached my nostrils. What kind of person needed a fire in that weather?

“I told you to take your pants off.” He splashed. “Why are you just standing there admiring the view?” He spread his arms out wide so I could appreciate the curves and ripples of his hard body.

“Cocky bastard.”

“Take ‘em off.”

A squirm ran down my spine as I unzipped my pants and let them fall off me.

“Turn around. I wanna see that ass.”

My face burned as I turned and lowered my boxers.

“Atta boy,” he cooed. “Now the shirt.”

I raised my shirt slowly, savouring the way his eyes held me. I felt them on my skin like hot fingers. I turned back to him. The way he looked at me made me almost want to leap into that dark pit. Almost.

“Jump.”

I took a step forward and looked down at the murky water. I shook my head.

“You trust me, right?” He swept his arms through the water. “It’ll feel good. I promise.”

I exhaled.

“Jump.”

The cool water hit me before I’d even realized my feet had left the ground. Darkness swallowed me. Water filled my mouth and nostrils. I thrashed around until I came up choking. Cody’s body surrounded me, holding me above the surface as he treaded water.

“I wouldn’t’ve told you to jump if I’d known you couldn’t swim.”

“I can swim.” I kicked my legs. The water was as silky as it was dark.

"Yeah, you swim like you cook." He kissed me, running his hands all over my body, teasing my hard nipples.

I let out a sigh as the water leached the heat from my bones.

"See?" He squeezed my chin. "I'm always right."

"What the fuck was that?" I pulled myself up onto his body as something grazed my ankle.

His laugh echoed through the trees. "Probably just weeds. Or maybe a fish."

"There are fish in here?"

"Of course." He gave me that look that said, *you are so fucking cute.* "If you hold still, the little ones will come up and bite you." His fingers ran up and down my sides in fast little pinches until I was laughing and completely terrified all at once.

He pushed me through the water to a spot where our feet could touch the muddy bottom. Something squirmed under my foot, making me jerk my leg.

"So, this is what your life was like growing up? All this nasty wild stuff."

"Pretty much." He laughed again.

"I'm really sorry about what you told me, and about what I said to you." I looked down at his muscled chest, because I was having a hard time meeting his eyes. "I hate to think you had to go through foster care."

"Don't be sorry." He squeezed my chin. "That's why I didn't tell you sooner."

"I gotta be honest. It kinda hurts that you didn't want to tell me."

"Shit." His forehead wrinkled as he rubbed his temples between his thumb and index finger. "I didn't mean to hurt you Trav, I just…"

"You just what?"

"Didn't know how to talk about it."

"A therapist who doesn't know how to talk about their childhood? How cliche." I ran my hand down his chest, circling his hard nipple. "I'm not a professional or anything, but I wanna be there for you. I wanna share your pain like you shared mine."

"I had a great childhood." He grabbed my hand and twisted our fingers together.

"Did you ever know your real parents?"

"Of course I did." His lips pressed together. "They raised me, didn't they?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be an asshole, I meant, you know."

"My birth parents?" He looked down into the water, and for a second, I thought there was some awful creature sneaking up on us,

but when I moved closer to him, he ran his hand through the water, splashing me in the face. “No, I never met them.”

I opened my mouth, but he cut me off.

“—But I really did have a great childhood. Hearing *I love you* everyday, and knowing that it’s completely true can pretty much make up for anything.” He splashed me again. “I remember the first time my mom said it—I think it was, like four months after my parents adopted me—she went all shy afterwards, like she hadn’t meant to say it, and she wasn’t sure if it was okay. Then I said it back, and her whole face just lit up and she said it again.”

Tingles ran down my spine and spread over my skin. It was like I could feel the memory playing behind his eyes. Once again, I didn’t know what to say. Cody got quiet too, like he’d gone deep inside his own thoughts for a moment.

“What the fuck is that?”

Cody turned to where I was staring over his shoulder at the muddy bank. The cutest little animal was biting into the head of a thrashing fish.

“Is that a beaver?” I gaped.

“Otter.” Cody reached down into the water and came up with a rock. “Careful, they’re nasty up close. Got attacked by one when I was a kid. Latched right onto my scalp. Almost drowned me. Wouldn’t let me get above water.” He rubbed his hand over the back of his head. “Still got scars under my hair from its teeth. Better hope I never go bald.”

“Holy shit.” I looked at the skinny little thing across the lake with just a bit of skepticism. “How’d you beat it off?”

“My dad bashed its skull in with an oar.”

The rock flew from his hand, nearly grazing the otter’s head. It dropped the chewed-up fish and slunk into the water, almost soundlessly.

“What are you doing, you asshole?” I grabbed his arm.

“Forgot you don’t like that kind of thing. Sorry.” He gave me his *you’re so fucking cute* grin.

“Because it’s so unusual to think it’s fucked up and demented to throw rocks at animals?” I rolled my eyes.

“I thought it was scaring you.”

“Well, it’s not like it’s gone. We just can’t see it anymore.” I shifted my feet as I felt something brush my ankles again. Maybe I just imagined it. “Can we get out now?”

Twilight was swallowing the forest and the heat was becoming close to tolerable.

“But I’ve just got you naked.” He grinned and pressed his body against mine, making me realize how hard he was.

"You can get me naked whenever you want."

"Mmm, but I want you now." He pushed his tongue into my mouth and gripped my arms in a way that drove the breath from me. His hand reached down and fondled me under the dark water, and I forgot all about the killer-otters, and hungry fish, and tentacled monsters. I forgot everything when Cody touched me.

I gasped in quick breaths as he kissed over my chin, my jaw, down my neck. He teased his fingers up and down my torso as his lips moved lower and lower, not stopping even when they were submerged in water. After just a few inches, I couldn't see his head any more, only feel his lips like the little fish waiting for us to stand still so they could nibble at our skin.

He broke the surface, breathed deeply, stole my lips in a kiss, inhaled again, and plunged back down.

I felt his weightless hair brush my thighs before I felt his lips on my cock. I doubled forward, scrambling to find his head in the dark water. I gripped his hair just as his lips slid over my shaft. He slid up and down fast and hard, sending waves of pleasure rushing up my spine. He surfaced quickly, gulping in air with a grin, before sinking back down and taking me fast again.

Something splashed behind me. I wasn't listening. I didn't care.

My thighs shook until my legs felt weak, and Cody's invisible hands pressed into my legs to support me. It made me shake even harder. I nearly burst from the pleasure of his mouth. I gripped his hair so hard that I didn't realize I was forcing him down under the water. My whole body tensed. My moan echoed through the falling twilight. My hips thrust forward, completely out of my control, as Cody drained all the pressure from my body into his eager mouth.

He came up spluttering, coughing and smiling. "Jesus, were you trying to drown me?" He laughed. "It wasn't enough to choke me on your dick, you have to drown me too?"

"I, uh, sorry. I wasn't paying attention."

"I actually really love when you lose control." It was almost too dark to see his expression clearly, but I could feel the lust glowing from his eyes. "I love that I have to tie you down to keep you from going wild."

"That's not why you do it, is it?" My face flushed as he traced his fingers over my jaw. "You don't think—"

He shook his head. "I tie you up because you feel safe when I do." He brought his lips so close to mine that I could feel his exhale. "I like when you feel safe."

The way his tongue plunged into my mouth, and his hands teased over my body told me he wasn't even close to being done with me. An aftershock of pleasure twitched up my spine as his hands

stroked down my ass, spreading, touching. He pushed me backward with the force of his kiss, trudging up the bank, so the water grew lower and lower on our bodies.

He let one hand tease inside of me while the other pushed me down into the slimy dirt, face up, knees bent. My toes stuck into the water as Cody climbed on top of me. He was a bear again, and I was his dinner. He devoured me with his lips, groaning into my skin as he played with my ass. I imagined he had me tied up again, and in a way, I believed it. I felt trapped under him, and I loved that control.

"Put your arms around me," he purred into the crook of my neck before nipping the tender skin.

His words wrapped around me like ropes. I snaked my arms around his neck as he stroked himself off between my thighs, groaning louder and louder as he rutted into me. It felt like all the heat of the night was being produced by our bodies as we sweat into each other's skin.

Cody's hands raked down my chest. I loved the way he got rough just before he came. He sucked my bottom lip, bit down like he was trying to chew it off. One of his hands lay against my throat in a possessive touch. The other gripped my cock. His huge body spasmed and convulsed as he collapsed into me, jetting cum between my thighs, marking me like I belonged to him.

My breath came out in a long, aching moan that I hadn't realized I'd been holding in my chest for the entire time Cody had been lost in climax.

"So perfect," he murmured into the slick skin of my chest. "So perfect…"

His hips kept thrusting slowly into the slick mess he'd made of my thighs. His cock was still completely hard as it nudged between my asscheeks. Even satisfaction couldn't subdue the intensity of his arousal.

"I love feeling your body." He ran his hands up and down my arms. His cheek brushed mine. His cock nudged closer to my ring.

"What are you doing?" I gulped as I felt him press into me; demanding entry.

"I'm loving you, Travis." His mouth captured mine. His silken tongue slid into me as he drew his hips back and pushed them forward again. My heart punched against my chest as I felt his cum slickened cock push against me, just barely opening me. I could feel him, so bare and naked in every way imaginable.

"Wrap your legs around me," he groaned. His eyelashes fluttered against my cheek. His hips inched up and down, teasing me with his tip.

He reached under my pelvis and jerked me up as my legs

hooked up around his waist. His hands slipped with all the mud clinging to them, but he dug his fingers into my flesh and held on tight.

"That's it…" His voice was darker than the night around us; darker than the silent lake. I gazed up at the stars peeking out above him as his bare cock pushed into me.

I groaned out, wanting to clench my fingers in the mud as he dove deeper and deeper inside of me, but I didn't move my hands from his neck where he'd told me to put them. There was nothing separating our skin as he invaded me slowly, stretching me until I was squeezed around his entire cock. It was like he was so big he forced the air from my lungs; it all came rushing out in a long moan. He just rocked his hips slowly, building steady pressure before pulling out and thrusting back into me.

I buried my hands in his wet hair, as he pumped into me, hard and completely out of control. I could barely see him in the darkness, but I was engulfed by all his bare skin; on top of me; inside me; slapping against me.

Cody claimed he didn't fuck, but *good god*, he was fucking me hard. My cock bobbed between us, begging for friction, but I didn't touch it, didn't move my hands. I just wanted Cody to control me.

Cody's rhythm stuttered. The night went silent. His breath hushed from his lips like steam from a doused fire. His thighs trembled and his cock twitched violently as he jetted cum right into my begging body.

Sound exploded back as a long aching groan poured out of Cody's mouth. He pulled back and pushed into me again, forcing his cum to leak out of me and spill down my skin. I felt so filled by him, so marked by everything he'd poured into me.

"So... so perfect…" He pulled out and fell into me, kissing every inch of sweat soaked skin he could find. His lips were even more relentless than the mosquitos eating us alive. Cody may have been eating me alive too.

The woods buzzed around us as Cody scooped me into his arms and carried me—barefoot and naked—over the rough ground towards the house, not giving a shit that we were leaving our clothes in the woods. Something rustled and hissed a few feet away from us. I didn't flinch. What did I have to be afraid of? I was with a mother-fucking bear.

Chapter Nineteen
The Things That Come Out At Night

Cody didn't set me down until we were in his bed, and when we'd made a complete sweaty, mud-caked mess of the sheets, he carried me to the shower. Filth streamed off our bodies under the warm water. I scraped at the muck matted into my hair while Cody soaped my ass a little too enthusiastically. I ran my hands down my front and scraped at a glob of mud on my thigh.

The glob twitched.

"What the fuck? Get it off!" My scream echoed off the walls of the shower. I shook my leg violently, watching the glob squirm on my skin. "What the fuck is that?"

Cody's laugh rang out over my scream as he scraped the squishy blob from my leg with his fingernail.

"It's just a leech. Here... you have another one."

I jerked away as he pulled something off my back and threw it into the middle of the shower. The living globs squirmed over the tiles, stretching themselves out and squishing back into flat slugs as they wriggled along the floor, trying to resist being swept down into the drain. I ran my hands all over my body, searching my skin. Everything was trying to eat me.

Cody laughed again as I backed into his body.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you." He popped open a bottle of shampoo and squirted it into the middle of the shower.

The leech's wriggling became writhing as Cody dumped more and more shampoo onto them, then dropped a bar of soap on the floor for good measure. One of them slipped down the holes of the drain, followed by the other. I didn't exactly mind seeing them swept away to their death, even though I knew I probably should have.

"See? You're always safe with me." Cody squirted what was left of the shampoo onto my head and raked his fingers through my hair.

"It seems more like I'm in constant danger when I'm with you."

"When have you ever gotten hurt with me?"

I stopped to think. "Never."

"See?" He ran his hands down my neck before soaping his own hair. "I'll always keep you safe."

I turned to smile at him, but it faded as soon as I looked at him, my mouth falling open. "There's one in your ear!"

I stepped back, stumbling over the soap. My other foot slipped in the shampoo and I fell, bracing myself to go smashing through the glass shower wall, but instead I felt Cody's hand on my wrist, pulling me into him.

"Always safe." He stuck a finger in his ear and wiggled it

around.

"Other ear."

When I'd checked every crevice of our bodies to make sure nothing was left clinging to our skin, Cody dried me off. We'd made a filthy mess of his bed, so we curled up under the covers in the spare room—the one I'd woken up in the first morning I'd arrived. That time felt like a thousand years ago. I'd be tempted to believe my life before Cody had all been just a bad dream if the proof wasn't on the nightstand. My wallet and dead cell-phone still sat there—right next to the envelope of money.

"Oh shit, I missed one!" He grabbed me by the chin and looked into my ear. Terror screamed up my spine until he nipped my ear and laughed. "Kidding."

"You're not funny."

"I thought you said you weren't going to lie to me again." He winked and kissed my cheek.

Something clattered outside. It sounded like a garbage can being knocked over. I jolted again, but Cody pressed me down into the bed.

"Just a raccoon."

A loud, growling *huff* rose up through the open window, followed by another crash of tin and crunching gravel.

"Maybe a bear."

So many bears. The racket got louder. Whatever wild thing was out there must've been rolling a garbage can around in the driveway. Then there was a quiet *clip clop*.

"Maybe a goat."

Somehow that was more frightening. The racket went suddenly silent.

Cody stroked up and down my body in a way that ordered me to relax. He paused at the small of my back to tease his fingers in my waistband. He'd bought me new pajamas, new boxers, new everything. It was awkward at first to let him do so much for me, but the more I let myself fall into him, the easier it became. I didn't even think about it anymore.

I snuggled my back against his chest and closed my eyes. Another growling *huff* broke the silence, but I ignored it.

"Travis…" He stroked his hand up and down my side. "Can we talk about something?"

I didn't tense. I'd gotten used to letting him stick his hands inside me and pull out whatever he wanted. When he asked a question; I answered. That was how our relationship worked. He was fixing me, but he couldn't do it unless I worked with him.

He put his lips close to my ear and held me so that I felt

wrapped in his arms. “Can we talk about the envelope?”

I didn’t have to open my eyes to see the envelope on the nightstand; it was burned into my mind. I tucked the thin sheet between me and Cody to keep our hot bodies from sticking together.

“What is there to talk about?”

“I’ve seen you looking at it. It’s not good for you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No lies.” He kneaded at the tension in my shoulders with his warm hands. “I think you need to get rid of it.”

“Is this about paying you for all the stuff you bought me? I can get a jo—”

“You know that’s not what it’s about. You’re holding on to bad memories.”

At first I thought the low growl had come from Cody, but then I realized it was coming from outside.

“I’m not holding onto anything. I just… I just don’t know what to do with it.”

“I think we should give it a proper burial.” He reached over me and picked the ragged envelope off the nightstand. “I think you should lay to rest everything that made you think you needed to steal this.”

Tiny hairs prickled on the back of my neck. I swatted at the skin, thinking something was trying to eat me again. Cody stroked the envelope, and it only made the feeling worse. I reached out to take it from him, but he jerked his hands away. The prickle spread up my scalp, forcing the hairs at my nape to stand on end.

“See? You’re still so emotional about this money. You can’t even stand the thought of me taking it away from you.”

“I just don’t think sticking things in the ground is the solution to everything. It’s perfectly good money.”

“You can’t keep carrying this pain around with you. You don’t deserve that.” He thumbed the cash, shifting slightly so he was further from me. Further out of reach.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” I moved fast, snatching for the envelope, but Cody grabbed both my wrists in one huge hand and pinned them to his thigh. His other hand tensed on the money.

Never make a wounded animal feel cornered. Even I knew that.

Cody drew back sharply from the sick *crack* of my forehead bashing into his face. He dropped my wrists and clutched his hands over his nose. Blood oozed between his fingers. The horror in his eyes punched me in the gut.

"I'm sorry." I covered my mouth with shaking hands. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"So there's the temper you've been talking about." Cody winced as he laughed. It was a fake laugh. So fake.

"I'm so sorry." I couldn't stop my head shaking back and forth, like I was trying to tell myself that this wasn't happening.

"You're so clumsy." He stood from the bed and walked out the door, covering his face like he was trying to hide the blood from me. "So clumsy."

I chased after him. The bathroom door slammed in my face. I jerked on the locked knob. Slammed my fist against the door. I stopped. Took a slow, shuddering breath, and tapped my hand against the door.

"Cody…" I swallowed the tightness in my throat. "I'm sorry."

The faucet turned on.

"Are you okay?" I lay my open palm against the door, letting it slide down the rough wood. "I'm sorry." I put my hands to my temples and took a step back, because I felt myself about to pound on the door again. I took another step back. Another.

What had I done?

The envelope of money sat on the bed—stained by bright red splatters. I grabbed it and tried to rub out the blood, but it only smeared across the paper. A sob clawed up my throat. I swallowed it back. *Hold it together. Hold it the fuck together.* I rubbed harder, scratched at the blood stain, ripping the envelope into pieces. And the money. I just kept tearing at everything around me until I was sitting in a mess that had once been worth over five-thousand dollars.

Axel would definitely kill me if he found me now.

The *clip clop* echoed through the night, followed by another *huff,* but I was just listening to the water running in the bathroom. I pulled my knees up to my chest and buried my face in them so I wouldn't have to look at the mess I'd made. Another sob choked me. Sweat dripped down the back of my neck.

If Cody was done with me…

There was a *baahahaaa* followed by a louder, faster *clip clop, clip clop.*

He'd promised to leave me as soon as I hurt him. My gut twisted at the thought of him keeping his promise; and at the thought of him breaking it. A mess of torn up bills shook in my hands. I wished he could've fixed me like he'd said he would. Wished it'd been

as easy as he'd thought it was. I wished I… I wished I…

I tore another bill into tinier pieces without looking at it. The water in the bathroom turned off. A growl exploded from the darkness outside. Then I heard the scream. Fear burned through every cell in my body. It was a man's scream. High-pitched and terrified. I leapt to the open window, searching the darkness. The scream grew louder and louder, tearing through me until I was shaking.

For that horrifying instant, I forgot about what I'd done until the window slammed shut.

"Who's out there?" My voice trembled as I turned to find Cody standing behind me.

"Just a goat."

"That didn't sound like a goat."

"Goats sound like humans when they scream."

I was about to ask how he knew what screaming goats sounded like, but the question died on my tongue as I returned to the moment, and instead I said, "I'm sorry." My throat tightened until it burned. I breathed slow, desperately trying to keep the tears in. Trying to control myself. How fucking hopeless.

"You don't need to keep apologizing." Cody put his hand on my neck. "It was an accident." The front of his hair dripped with water, and I could already see where his nose would be swollen in the morning.

"It wasn't an accident." I pulled away from him. I couldn't meet his eyes, so I looked out into the darkness. "I knew what I was doing—or, I sort of did. I lost control."

The screaming still rang faintly in the background.

"I startled you and you flinched."

"Cody, I don't think you've always been honest with me."

His eyes went still as he searched my face. "What are you saying?"

"I know that you're not going to leave me." I breathed. Slow. Trying to resist the urge to gasp in shaking breaths. "Even if I hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me. You're just tired." He put his arms around me and pushed me into the bed. "We're both tired and you didn't know what you were doing."

"Stop lying." I looked at the mess I'd made on the bed. My eyes stung and that stinging feeling spread over my entire body. "You were lying from the beginning, weren't you?"

The bulge of Cody's pulse throbbed erratically against his throat. His face was calm, but he was panicking. I'd done it. I'd scared him.

"You tell me to be honest with you." I shook my head slowly.

“But you’ve never been honest with me.”

“What are you saying?” The vein beat against the tender skin under his stubble. “What are you trying to say?”

“You think you’re protecting me by lying, but you’re not.”

He blinked. “I’ve never lied to you on purpose.”

“Like I didn’t hit you on purpose?”

He sucked in one of those breaths that I could feel in my own chest. When he spoke, it was very, *very* slowly. “What have I hidden from you?”

“Like when you wouldn’t tell me you were sick. You ended up in the hospital. How is that better for me than if you’d just told the truth?”

“Sometimes I don’t know how to tell you the truth.” He stared into my eyes as his words crawled out of his mouth. “Sometimes I don’t think you want me to tell the truth.”

“I don’t think I can keep doing this if you lie to me.” A crack. I couldn’t keep the tears from spilling out. First one, then it all poured out of me.

“It’s hard when I know the truth is going to hurt you.”

“You didn’t tell me you grew up in foster care. You let me act like an asshole.”

“I thought it would make you sad, and I was right.” Cody’s expression fell apart. He looked so pained by my tears. I was still hurting him. Fuck, I was finally doing it. Everything was falling apart.

No, it wasn’t falling apart. I was ripping it to pieces.

“You don’t need to protect me—not from the truth.” I inhaled and exhaled a shaky breath. Pressed the heel of my hand to my eyes. Everything in me tensed as I tried to keep from spilling out again. “So, let’s talk about this. I hurt you. What’s your professional opinion on that?”

“We’re tired,” he rubbed sweat from his forehead. “We’re both too hot to have a conversation.”

“I don’t want to have a conversation… I want you to fix me. Like you promised you would.”

He froze. Like an animal caught in the light. He spoke softly and there was something shaken in his voice. “We can talk about this tomorrow.”

He moved to gather the pieces of ripped up money, but stopped, hesitating on whether he should touch them. I’d never seen him look hesitant before.

An ache throbbed in the hollow of my chest. I’d woken him up, shattered the dream.

I shook the blanket, sending all the pieces of torn up paper fluttering to the floor. He crawled in beside me, breathing in a slow,

heavy *huff huff*. His arms pinned mine to my sides. I could feel his heart hammering through his skin.

"We can talk about this tomorrow," he said. "We don't need to talk about it now." The way he kept repeating that made me think he didn't want to talk about it at all. I was losing him. Cody had lied again.

He couldn't fix me, and he knew it.

Chapter Twenty
Please Don't Say That

I was alone when I woke up, finally escaping the tangle of nightmares I'd been lost in all night. Every piece of shredded money had been carefully picked up and set on my nightstand—every piece. I felt more broken than I'd ever felt in my life. All I'd wanted was for Cody to pick up all my pieces.

My chest felt too heavy to breathe.

The house was silent.

Something rattled outside the window. I rose slowly and looked out to see Cody picking up the trash that had been knocked all over the yard. I spotted something in the driveway that was so mangled, I thought I would throw up. It *had* been a goat screaming the night before. I looked away as Cody grabbed it around its chewed up leg, and dragged it out into the trees. I tried to make myself feel sorry for the poor animal, but it was hard to find sympathy after it could've nearly killed Cody.

Was I any better?

I wanted to curl back up in the bed. I wanted him to curl up beside me. I wanted to wake up from the nightmare.

I was still lost in my own head when his heavy footsteps entered the house. I nearly tripped down the stairs in my hurry to get to him. I just needed to put my arms around him. I needed to keep telling him how fucking sorry I was. As if that would change anything.

"You hungry?" Cody turned to me as I reached the bottom step.

Dark rings marked his eyes, and the fine creases in his face looked much deeper—like he hadn't slept at all. Maybe I'd woken him every time I'd jolted out of sleep. My gut twisted as I noticed the dark bruise on his nose. There was no way I could keep any food down.

He opened the fridge and pulled out eggs. I couldn't bring myself to break the silence between us. I'd said *I'm sorry* so many times the words sounded meaningless. Cody had told me over and

over that talking would help me understand my feelings, but my vocabulary suddenly felt too small to make a difference.

The groan of an engine broke open the silence.

"What's that?" My head snapped to the garage door.

"Tow truck." He turned on the stove and ran his hands through his hair. "I'm having those old cars hauled off."

I felt dizzy, like the ground was being pulled out from under me. The familiar routine we'd built was being destroyed. I was trying to find footing, but I was just falling.

"You were gonna fix them."

"You were right." He cracked an egg into the sizzling pan. "I'm not a fucking mechanic. I had no business messing around with those cars."

"I'm sorry I said that." My heart palpitated against my chest. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"It's nothing you did." He scrubbed his hands over his face as he turned to me. "None of this is because of something you did." He sighed as he dropped the eggshells into the trash.

"I upset you."

He turned. His head shook, but he didn't say anything. I wanted him to say something.

We sat down to eat, but my churning stomach refused the food. I could barely swallow. The tow truck rumbled noisily outside. Every time Cody looked up, fear jolted down my spine. I expected to hear him say, '*you need to leave.*' But every time, he just sighed and looked back down to his food.

My gaze traced the scar on his forehead, down to the bruise on his cheek. Would he really let me keep hurting him?

His eyes met mine and held them for one heartbeat before he bolted up from the table, leaving half his breakfast uneaten as he walked out onto the deck. The slamming door felt like a canyon tearing open between us.

I watched him through the glass, unsure of whether I should follow him. He paced back and forth, finally looking up at the sky, puffing his cheeks in an explosive exhale.

He threw his fist into the punching bag—again and again. The chain swung so hard on the beam it was affixed to that the whole cabin groaned. Every blow hit me in the gut.

I wasn't thinking as I rushed out to him. "Stop! Please stop!" I slammed the door shut behind me and grabbed him by the shoulder just as he pulled his arm back. His elbow slammed into my chin, but the momentum of his punch didn't break. His fist collided with the punching bag so hard the fabric tore open. Sand spilled out all over the deck as the bag fell to the ground like a body cut from a noose. I

stumbled back shocked, clutching my face.

"Jesus, Travis." Cody spun around. "Jesus. Fuck. I'm sorry." He was wide eyed, completely horrified. He grabbed me by the shoulder and pressed the hem of his shirt to my lip. It must have been bleeding, but I didn't feel it. I was too shocked.

"Guess we're even now," I said without really thinking about my words.

He swore under his breath. "I should have stopped." He growled another curse. "You told me to stop and I should've fucking listened."

"It's not your fault." I took his hand in mine and drew it away from my face.

"It's all my fucking fault."

"Please stop." I'd never seen Cody like this before and it left me shaken. "Calm down. Please."

"I'm sorry." He rubbed his face like he was trying to scrub something off. His eyes softened, and he took my hand. "C'mere."

The rumble of the tow truck returned, shaking the house as Cody led me upstairs to his bed. He disappeared into the bathroom and came back with a small bottle and a handful of cotton balls.

"It's witch hazel for your bruise," he said as he saw me eyeing the bottle. "Guess I can't say you'll always be safe with me anymore." He pressed a cotton ball to my lip and put his thumb to my forehead, forcing me to wince as he stroked the bruise from the night before.

I shrunk with shame as the memory flashed through my mind. The *crunch* of his nose, the blood on his face, the fear in his eyes. I put my hand to the small split in my own lip. We weren't even close to even. He hadn't seen me behind him when he hit me. I'd *wanted* to hurt him.

He opened a bottle and poured a tiny amount of clear liquid onto a cotton ball. I looked up into his face as he held my chin and dotted the cool liquid against my forehead. I closed my eyes and soaked in the feeling of his warm hands on me. They'd always been so gentle.

"I shouldn't have called you a liar." I wanted to scream those words, but it just came out as a whisper. "I'm sorry for all the things I said to you last night."

The pain that flashed across his face cut me to the core.

I stroked my thumb across the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry for all of it."

"Please, for the love of God, stop apologizing." He grabbed my hand. "I'm the one who's sorry."

"For what?"

"Everything." He scrubbed his face with his hands again.

“Please, just remember that I’m sorry for everything.”

He sat on the bed far enough away that it would’ve been impossible for him to reach out and touch me. He was pulling away.

I could sense the thousand thoughts buzzing behind his eyes. I wasn’t ready to hear them. I lunged forward and put my lips to his, forming a dam on his mouth to keep his words from coming out.

His hesitation lasted for one moment before he kissed me back. He slid his arms around me, crushing me into him. I tangled my fingers into his hair as I opened my lips for him to enter. I had no idea what was going on anymore. I was just holding on to him.

I was still just clinging desperately to him when we were naked, and Cody was on top of me, groaning into my slack lips, thrusting into my body. I stared into his eyes as he stroked my cock; demanding and gentle at the same time; a force I could never resist. I clutched at his sweaty thighs as I tipped over the edge of climax. His rhythm stuttered as I spilled into his hand. He groaned, collapsing into me like a cave falling in on itself as he pumped me full.

I wanted that moment to last for all of eternity. I wanted him. Just him. I wanted the man who’d opened me up, taught me that there might be something worth loving inside of me. And I needed him to know how much I wanted him.

“I love you,” I breathed against the throbbing pulse of his neck. “I love you.”

He sucked in a gasped breath as he put his lips to my ear. His exhale came hot and strangled. I almost didn’t hear what he said, and when I did, I wished I hadn’t.

“Please don’t say that.”

Empty ache filled me as he pulled out, letting his cum leak onto the bed. I grabbed onto his hand, refusing to let him pull away from me.

“I love you,” I said again. “And I’m sorry I’m not as perfect as you thought I was, but I want to try to be good enough for you.”

Cody looked down at his hand clutched around mine. He covered his eyes, squeezing his temples.

“You need to leave.”

Chapter Twenty-One
All His Bitter Anguish Bearing

I stared up into his gorgeous face, lined with exhaustion. The hollow ache where he’d been inside me was unbearable.

“Is this because I hurt you?” My pulse still raced from the

climax we'd shared, and it doubled as I bolted into a sitting position.

"No." Cody said quickly. Then he paused. He picked up his pants and looked like he was going to put them on for a second before he tossed them back to the floor. "It is. But it's not your fault." Deep wrinkles formed on his forehead as he rubbed his eyes and sank to the bed. "I tried too hard to keep you, Trav." He scooped up my shirt and handed it to me. "It wasn't right."

"All I ever wanted was to be with you." I threw my shirt back to the floor. "If it's not because I hurt you then… I don't understand."

"I need to get out of this town." He let out a long sigh. "I don't know where I'm going, but I have to get out of here."

"Do you think I won't come with you?" I set my hand in his sweaty palm. "I'd go anywhere with you, Cody."

His phone started to ring in the pocket of his rumpled jeans. He didn't make a move to answer it.

"I haven't been honest with you, Trav."

"About what?"

"Anything."

"I promise I won't be angry if you tell me the truth." I hesitated. "No matter what it is."

"You wanna know the truth?" The darkness in Cody's eyes reminded me of when he'd confessed that he'd grown up in foster care. "Truth is, when you showed up, I started to feel good for the first time in a long while. I started to feel like myself—or maybe just who I wished I was."

"I felt the same way when I met you." My heart fluttered in my chest. "Let me keep making you feel good. God, Cody, that's all I ever wanted."

"Remember when you asked me if it bothered me not knowing my parents?"

"Yes," I said slowly.

He squinted at something on the wall. His voice became flat and emotionless. "'Bout eight years ago, it started bothering me a lot." His lips pressed tight. "And that didn't sit right. Felt wrong. I already had parents. The ones who raised me." His fingers crept across the bed to stroke my thigh, making me want to curl into his body. I really would've gone anywhere with him.

"But I couldn't stop wondering who I *was*." He looked down at his hand on my naked thigh like he'd noticed it for the first time. He folded his hands back under his chin. "I got my biological mother's address to write to, but my father's info on file wasn't much more than you'd get from a police report; caucasian male; six foot six; dark brown hair."

He listed those details like he'd memorized them by heart. Like

he'd repeated them to himself over and over.

"I wrote to my mother. She'd moved down to Texas. She didn't respond for a year. When she finally did, she said she wanted to meet me." He picked up his shirt and twisted it like he was wringing it out. "At first, I didn't want to go down to Dallas to meet her. Felt like I would somehow lose my real parents if I met her, but they just kept telling me I'd always be their son. Even rented me an apartment in Dallas so I could stay for a while and feel the situation out." His lips pressed together again. "I just couldn't stop wondering what my story was, where I came from. All I knew was my mother had signed away parental rights three days after I was born, and I had to find out why."

His phone started ringing again. He waited for it to stop before he continued. "When I finally went… when I finally met my mom…" The chills running down his spine spread to my own skin. "She had the same eyes as me."

So he'd lied about meeting his parents. I didn't want to think about what else he'd lied about.

"She was cold at first." His brows pressed in. "Seemed like she didn't want to meet me at all. Then she'd warm up a bit, before drawing back, cancelling plans, not returning calls… After about six months, she finally said getting to know me was too hard. She was sorry. She was so sorry. Said it over and over. Said she couldn't do it —she'd spent twenty-three years trying to pretend I'd never existed." The weight of his words fell on me, and I couldn't stop myself from wrapping my arms around him. Deep, aching empathy twisted in my chest. He should've let me hold him so much sooner.

"If you wanna know who you are so bad, I'll tell you." I put my forehead against his temple and pressed my lips to his ear. "You're mine."

I took his hand. Tight. So he knew I wasn't letting go. His lips pressed together. He ripped his hand away.

Cody pulled his shirt over his head and grabbed his jeans from the floor. His cellphone went off again until he took it from his pocket and shut it off, throwing it across the room. "I had to ask her…" He trailed off. Pulled his pants on. Started over. "I asked her if she knew who my father was. If she knew how I could contact him." He spoke slower and slower, his voice lost and far away. "That was when she finally told me that my father's description read like a police report, because it was one." His heartbeat squeezed and expanded the room. "It's what my mother told the cops after she was dragged into the woods and assaulted by a stranger." His hands trembled as he did up his belt. "She said I look just like him."

I grabbed his shaking hand back in mine and kissed it; the knuckles; the palm; between his fingers; up his wrist. I put my lips to

his and breathed, “Did you really think that would change the fact that I love you?”

“It was never supposed to.” He pulled his face back, making the space between our lips too wide to bear. “That wasn’t the point.”

“What—”

“I’m saying sometimes you think you want to know the truth, but you don’t. There are times you just wish you’d been given a lie.” The air split open with ring of the landline next to his bed. “That’s why I won’t be telling you why you need to leave.” His gaze flitted to the phone. He ran his hand through his hair. Moved to the door. Stopped. “You need to be gone by the time I get back.”

Chapter Twenty-Two
Found Him

He never said, ‘*I want you to leave.*
He only said, ‘*You need to leave.’*

The ringing phone disrupted my broken thoughts as Cody walked out of the room, down the stairs. I wanted to run after him and pull him back to me, but I was frozen. Now that he’d finally shown me his battered heart, I only wanted to kiss his lips until they stopped telling lies. Even as a small part of me couldn’t help feeling betrayed.

After all the trust we’d built, he’d kept all that hurt to himself. He’d lied to me. Even when he told me the story of his mother, he wouldn’t open up about the pain aching behind his words. After everything...

The ringing phone on the nightstand cut off abruptly—who’d wanted to get a hold of him so bad?

“What?” Cody’s deep voice reverberated downstairs, speaking into the cordless phone in the kitchen.

The stereo flicked on. *Stabat Mater.* Cody slammed the back door shut, and probably would’ve pounded on the punching bag if it’s guts hadn’t been spilled out all over the deck.

I eyed the landline on the nightstand. He’d always been so careful to hide his phone calls. The only thing he’d ever been careful about.

‘*Keep your nose in your own fucking business.’* Axel’s voice was still so strong in my mind. He was wrong. And Cody was wrong. I needed the truth. Instinct took over me.

I carefully lifted the phone from the receiver. Cody’s growl came through the speaker.

An ugly voice filled my ear. "... asshole sold a grand worth of shit for us last week, and he hasn't forked over a dime. Time to make him pay."

"On my way." Cody sighed. "What's the address again?"

"65 Chestnut. South side of town. Hurry up, 'cause I got another job for you when you're done that."

"I'm getting real fucking sick of these calls."

"Then you shount'a messed with one of our guys, fuckwad. We were *very* kind to let you live." His laugh sounded like he was gargling spit in the back of his throat. "You're just lucky we found a use for you, but if you stop being useful to us, well..."

Cody let out a long growl.

"I have a guy I need you to find. We're going to need you to *finish* the job if you know what I mean."

"Out of the question."

"Good thing I'm not asking. Look, there's money in it for you, but if you say no, I send someone over to snap your spine in half."

"I don't really give a fuck anymore. I'm not the guy you think I am. I'm not killing anyone."

My heart pounded so hard I was sure I wasn't hearing their words right. I couldn't be.

The man cleared his throat. "You got a pen ready? I'll give you the guy's details."

"I'm not doing it."

"Just take the information down. Unless you wanna get really good at using a wheelchair."

Cody let out another long growl.

"This guy stole from one of our crew. We've been looking for him for months. Seen him around your area. Little shit never goes far. Too fucking stupid." He cleared his throat. "Brown hair. Six feet. Skinny. He's got a tattoo of a crow on his neck."

My pulse stopped.

"No address, but I got his license plate here…"

"I can't do this," Cody cut in. "I'll do anything else, but I can't do this."

"No problem." His nasty laugh felt like it left a residue of slime in my ear. "We'll just snap your spine and have someone else do it."

Cody didn't respond.

"S'what I thought." The sound of a lighter came through the phone and he let out a long exhale. "You're gonna have to find him first, but you'll know what to do when you get your hands on him. Name's Travis Ashford."

My heart started again and throbbed out a thousand beats by the time Cody responded.

"I'll do it."

"Knew you would." That sick laugh burned in my ear long after I hung up the phone.

My hands shook as I pulled my clothes over my sweaty limbs. I had no idea what I was doing, but it felt like I was getting ready to run. My mind scrambled for something to hold on to. Nothing made sense.

'*I'll do it.*'

His words echoed in my head, stealing my ability to think of anything else. It was a lie. Of course it was a lie. Cody would never…

The backdoor opened and slammed shut. His footsteps thundered up the stairs.

I bolted to the bedroom door as Cody appeared in the frame.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving." I took a step back. "Like you wanted."

"Don't you dare leave this house." The lightning in his eyes was terrifying. He devoured the distance between us in three fast strides. The strength of his hand crushing around my wrist squeezed the breath out of me. "Travis, I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. Please don't leave."

Cody had been right about the truth. I would've loved hearing those words if I hadn't known the reality behind them.

"What's going on?" I stared into the storm behind his face.

"We're going to get out of here. I want you to come with me." He gripped my wrist tighter.

"Where?" I asked. Did it matter? Would he have told the truth?

"I don't know. Just give me an hour. Two. I need to figure this out." His nails dug into my skin. "I was so fucking wrong, Travis." His hand slid down my wrist and clasped my fingers. "I don't want you to leave."

"I knew that." I exhaled the pressure in my chest, staring into his eyes. I still wanted to believe him. Wanted it so bad.

He loosened his grip on my hand, paused, then crushed his lips to mine. My gasp exploded into his mouth. There was a rushed passion in his trembling kiss; a need to capture me like I'd never felt before. He stroked his lower lip over mine as he pulled away. His eyelashes fluttered open.

"Promise you'll stay here until I get back."

I looked into his eyes. "I promise."

He teased his fingers between mine before pulling away. For one second, he looked like he was going to say something, but he turned down the hall silently. I listened to his footsteps, waiting until the front door closed before dashing down the stairs. Fast breaths shook in and out of my chest as his tires crunched down the driveway.

Then I darted out to my car, stuffed the keys in the ignition, and followed him.

Chapter Twenty-Three
Were You Expecting Someone Else?

65 Chestnut, 65 Chestnut, 65 Chestnut. I repeated the address in my head in case I lost sight of Cody's car in the distance. My head spun until nothing felt real. *65 Chestnut.* What would I find when I got there? I didn't want to know. I had to know. Had to know.

'*Then you shount'a messed with one of our guys.'*

The junkie at the hospital. I'd known this would happen. I'd known. I'd known... How had Cody fucked with him? He had said… said he'd mediated a debt. Had I really believed that was true? A thought entered my mind, but it couldn't be right. It was too bizarre, too impossible. It was all fucking impossible

Open fields turned into storefronts, which faded into run down old houses. I just kept repeating the address so I wouldn't think about what I'd find when I got there.

'*I'll do it.'*

No. He wouldn't.

How did I know what Cody would do? I didn't know anything about him. He'd made sure I didn't.

Cody was kind. He was generous. He was gentle. He wouldn't...

Chestnut Street.

I stopped my car and got out, counting the house numbers as I stole down the street to the driveway where Cody's SUV sat. The front door of 65 Chestnut was ajar. Wood splintered around the busted lock —where someone's heavy boot had kicked it with so much force that it'd flown open.

Maybe this was some kind of therapy thing. Maybe, maybe, maybe, Cody was helping a patient get over a fear of… of having their house broken into.

Everything I'd wanted to believe was falling apart.

I held my breath, creeping up to the door, standing silent. That voice. It dug into my skin like claws. It was Cody, but it wasn't Cody. This person was ugly, mean, angry.

"I don't fucking have time for this. Give me the money you owe before I blow your goddamned brains out."

Someone sniveled back. "I don't have any money to give you."

“Well, then, you’re not going to like what happens next.”

Anguished moans reverberated in my ears, flooding my veins, soaking into my panicked heartbeats.

“Stop!” I screamed, forcing the door open to see Cody’s heavy black boot crush down on the back of the man’s knees.

Such a soft, delicate spot.

“What are you doing?” I backed away. “What are you *doing*?” I didn’t know how many times I said those words. They just kept repeating in my head, pouring out of my mouth.

“Trav, wait!”

“Don’t call me that.” My gaze darted from the snarl on Cody’s face to the gun he held over the man’s head.

“Baby.” All the ugliness melted and Cody was Cody again.

I stumbled back, tripped over a garbage can and spilled down the steps with a clatter of tin cans and soured milk containers. Cody rushed towards me, but he didn’t see. Wasn’t paying attention. He’d completely forgotten about the man behind him until the knife sliced down his calf.

“Fuck!” Cody twisted around and kicked the guy in the head, sending him flying across the floor. He grunted and didn’t get up.

I scrambled to my feet. Legs shaking. Mind racing. This was exactly what it looked like. Exactly what I knew I’d find. Still didn’t expect. Could never expect.

“Travis!” Cody limped after me, grunting as I bolted down the street. His hand closed around my wrist as I reached my car.

“Let go of me!” I jerked my arm from his. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

“I’m not going to hurt you.” He tucked the gun into his belt. “Please don’t run. Please. I need to keep you safe.”

“How the fuck could I be safe with a monster?” The last shred of denial I’d been clinging to dissolved and I was plunged into reality.

He looked like I’d punched him in the gut. I scanned his sweaty, rumpled body. The scuffs on his knuckles, the bleeding gash in his leg.

“Who are you?”

“Thought you said I was yours.” His expression faltered.

“You’re not a therapist.” It wasn’t a question.

Cody looked down at the ground. “I never really said I was.”

“You’re a liar.”

“Something like that.”

“A thug.”

“Please don’t say that.”

“On the phone.” I dropped my eyes to the gun. “You said you would...”

"I would never hurt you." He pressed closer to me. "You know I'd never hurt you." He grabbed for my hand. I pulled away, stumbling against my car. I reached for the keys in my pocket, but Cody's hand shot out, pinning my wrist to the hot metal. I winced in pain, dropping the keys. He released my arm just as suddenly as he'd grabbed it.

"Fuck, Travis, I'm sorry, I thought you had a knife."

"You thought I'd stab you?" I pressed my back against my car, reaching for the door handle. Why would he think I'd hurt him? *Why? Why? Why?* Unless...

My hand shot out, snatching the gun from his belt. My heartbeats exploded like cannons over a battlefield, making my vision so spotty, I could barely see his face.

"Travis, put that down." Cody took a step forward until his chest nearly pressed against the barrel of the gun. "You're going to hurt yourself." His voice was so calm as it swam around me. Always so calm. "You know I'd never hurt you."

So calm. So deep I could just fall into it. I wanted him to wrap his arms around me. Tell me this was all a misunderstanding. A bad dream. I still wanted to believe Cody could fix everything.

"That's it. You just need to breathe. You're not thinking."

I realized I'd been lowering my arms. Cody reached his hand out to me, and I thrust the gun against his throat.

There had once been a moment when I'd thought Cody could turn me into someone I could love.

"Wait!" Cody's eyes looked frantic, but he didn't try to grab for me as I backed up, snatched my keys, and scrambled into the car. "Travis, wait. Please. You don't know what kind of trouble you're in. I'll keep you safe, I promise."

I met his eyes. Inhaled. Exhaled. That deep musk of his body.

I clutched the gun, turning the keys in the ignition. My voice trembled as I broke our gaze.

"Why would I believe anything you say?"

Chapter Twenty-Four
Did I Dream Everything...

I had to pull over. My heart pounded so hard I couldn't think. I gripped the steering wheel to keep my hands from trembling, but it

only made it feel as though whole car was shaking as the earth fractured and ripped apart.

Had I known? Had I known? How long had I known? It wasn't the shock tearing me open—it was the lack of shock.

I couldn't see anything in front of me. The only thing in my vision was the sight of Cody standing over the sniveling mess of a man he'd beaten to a pulp. The violence in his eyes. The ugliness in his voice. I'd wanted to believe he was so much better than me.

Every warm feeling he'd ever given me curdled in my gut until I felt sick. I bolted from the car and fell onto my hands and knees in the ditch. I slumped next to my puddle of vomit, unable to stand. There was no hope for us. Never had been. I pulled my legs up into my chest and leaned against the car.

My eyes stung. That image wouldn't leave my mind. My forehead dropped onto my tucked up knees. I couldn't even cry. The feelings raging through me disappeared. My skin numbed. My everything numbed.

I was still frozen when I climbed back into my car. Maybe it was hours later. Maybe it was minutes. I didn't know where I was driving, but I drove until I felt sick again.

I got out of the car, but I didn't throw up. Darkness crept over me as the sun fell out of the sky. I had no idea where I was. I crawled into the backseat, trying not to look at the gun on the passenger's seat. My skin felt wrong. Too hot. Too cold. I didn't know if I was sick or just broken.

I fell asleep. The sun returned. I Drove. Looked at the gun. Felt sick.

Was he looking for me?

So dark. So lost. Cold. I lay down. Couldn't think. Shadows moved outside the car. Big shadows. Maybe just a deranged animal—or something more wild.

Don't think about the gun.

I dreamed Axel found me. I lay crumpled on the pavement, surrounded by a group of men. Just as they were about to bash my head in, Cody appeared, threw them to the ground and lifted me to my feet. Then he just walked away. I tried to call his name, but I couldn't remember what it was.

I was awake again. I didn't realize at first. Feeling slowly started to come back to me. Wished it hadn't. My chest hurt so bad I could hardly breathe. I thought of the first morning I'd woken up in his house. The peaceful cabin. All those quiet moments.

He'd lied to me. Lied about everything.

Was that the part that hurt?

My chest ached as I took a breath. Somehow… some part of

me… had always known he wasn't real. There was something in me that had been lying with him. The whole time.

How much of it had been a lie? Maybe there was nothing in me worth loving. Nothing in him worth loving.

I couldn't make myself believe that.

My tears finally came in two soft, slow rivers, and I still couldn't help wishing that Cody was there holding me. I cried until there was nothing left inside me.

I dreamed Cody pointed a gun at me. When I put my hands up, he turned it on himself. He pulled the trigger, but the gun didn't fire. It all just dissolved into nothing.

I woke up shivering, freezing, fevered. Ran out of gas. Fell asleep again.

I'd always been so careful. Never looked too closely. I knew I didn't want to see Cody's shadows. I'd even convinced myself they didn't exist.

My head ached. Shapes still moved outside the car. I couldn't make the nightmares stop. I dreamed of his lips. His warm body. All his sweet lies. I couldn't stop dreaming of everything between us. I wanted Cody back, but I'd never really had him. I'd only ever had the lie we'd both told.

My car cradled me like a coffin. I didn't know how long I'd been there. At some point, I'd realized the raw ache in my gut was hunger, but I had no motivation to find food.

I'd wanted that lie so fucking bad.

The sun dripped out of the sky in fiery orange and blood red. Had it been two days since I'd last seen Cody? Three? It was hard to keep straight when I couldn't stop dreaming about him.

Was he looking for me?

Dark. A small feeling like the buzz of a mosquito nagged me awake, begged me to get to my feet. I stumbled out of the coffin trembling. Putting one foot in front of the other felt like the hardest task in the universe. I slumped against my car.

Get up.

I'd heard that voice before. Not so much heard, but felt. It was the voice that always pushed me to keep going when life seemed impossible.

Get up.

I'd felt those words when I was fourteen; the first time Axel put his hands on me; the first time he said he'd kill me; the first time my mom told me to stop provoking him.

I'd felt those words the first time my mom overdosed and my hands had shaken so bad I didn't know if I'd be able to dial for an ambulance. I hadn't known if she'd make it. I hadn't known if I

wanted her to.

I'd felt those words… I'd felt them… when I'd sat outside the church during my sister's funeral; too afraid to go in, because I knew Axel would be there waiting for me.

I'd felt those words the night I called Cody.

Get up. Keep going.

I stood slowly. I didn't know why, but something in me didn't want to give up. I rubbed my aching eyes as I took in my surroundings.

My car was out of gas. I didn't have a phone. Didn't matter—I had no one to call. The moon glowed above the thick trees, but the chill in the air told me the sun wasn't far away. I tucked the gun into my belt.

There was only one option—the only one I'd ever had. I put one foot in front of the other, staggering down the gravel road, unsure of where I was going, just knowing that I had to keep walking.

I had no idea where I was… or… I stumbled past a tree covered in shoes, silhouetted against the moon.

I'd been driving back to him.

A prickle started in my feet and spread up through my whole body. If I were to turn around, walk the other way, I would end up right back at his cabin before the sun came up. And the truth was, that if I could've gone back, I probably would've. I stroked my fingers over my arm where Cody's number had long since faded.

I tried not to think about it. Hurt too much. I just kept walking forward along the dark road. Away from Cody.

My ears pricked as a low rumble drew up behind me. I turned into the headlights coming up the road. My heart thudded against my chest. *Was it him?*

The sporty car drove past me, splatting mud at my feet. My exhaustion hit me all over again, but I kept walking. Had to keep walking.

Something rustled through the woods next to me. I moved faster. I could've been wrong about the sunrise coming soon. The stars shone so bright overhead. I could have been lost in an endless night.

It reminded me of when I'd first met Cody.

Everything I'd been trying not to feel crashed into me. My legs shook. My head ached. I wouldn't let myself stop. If I stopped, I wouldn't get back up. But it was too late. Pain jolted up my spine as my knees hit the gravel. The voice inside of me screamed at me to keep going. I couldn't make it shut up. I clenched my fists, feeling my legs shake as I rose—too quickly. I went down hard.

Get. The. Fuck. Up.

When was the last time I'd eaten? Was that why I couldn't

move? I couldn't distinguish between the aches in my body and the raw pain tearing me apart. I pushed up, one more time, only to fall into the wet dirt.

The night hummed around me. Something moved in the trees, snapping sticks under-foot. A mosquito landed on my neck, and I barely had the strength to brush it away. If I lay there on the side of the road long enough, Cody was bound to drive by and find me. Or maybe a wild animal would get to me first.

I couldn't just lay there.

The darkness tore open as headlights blinded me. I grit my teeth as those words pounded in my head: *Get up. Get up. Get up*. I stumbled to my feet, somehow managing to wave to the passing truck. I tried to shout, but my throat ached. My heart sped as I watched the truck drive by. The forest around me grew wider as the night grew darker.

And then the truck stopped.

I scrambled forward. Hesitated. Getting in cars with strangers is the kinda shit that gets you killed.

But…

I'd painted myself into a corner, and there were two options: get in the car, or lay down and die.

I wasn't ready to die yet.

Covering my eyes against the glare of the headlights, I started to open my dry lips, when I heard his voice.

"Fancy seeing you out here."

For one second, everything in me froze. Then my feet skidded in the gravel as I bolted.

Chapter Twenty-Five
You Probably Should Have Run a Long Time Ago

Leaves whipped at my face as I skidded off the road, down the ditch into the dark woods. My feet crushed twigs like tender necks as I barreled away from the light still beaming from Axel's headlights.

My lungs burnt. My pounding heart begged me to lay down and die as I fought to keep going. I was so dizzy, I could barely register the stars overhead as I lost myself in the disorienting maze.

I stopped to listen and heard a faint rustling in the distance, followed by snapping branches. Was it him, following me? Or was it some animal?

I struggled to silence my gasped breaths as I crouched down against a thorned bush. If I kept still, he might not find me.

"Little cunt." Axel rustled through the trees like a serpent slithering through long grass. "Been looking for you a *long* ass time." His footsteps seemed to be growing further away. "You think I'm going to let you slip away now? Shoulda never fucked with me, you stupid little shit."

I begged my pounding pulse to be quiet as I drew the gun from my belt. The metal pressed against my sweaty palm, making me feel like everything I'd never wanted to be.

"Your mommy isn't here to protect you anymore." Axel taunted through the darkness. "I can do whatever I want with your sniveling ass."

The trigger fit my finger so perfectly.

Mosquitos tickled over my skin, creeping over the stinging scratches from the thorny bush. I closed my eyes and took three breaths as slowly and quietly as I could, jerking as a mosquito pierced my skin. I pressed my lips shut, resisting the urge to slap at the sharp itch. It went on forever as the little bug filled its belly. Another one landed on my neck. One on my cheek. I breathed slowly. In. Out. In.

Slap

I bit my lip. Axel's movements stopped. Changed course.

My pulse throbbed in my ears. Should I run? Creep away? Stay still?

The gun felt so heavy in my hand. Panic stole my senses. I only felt instinct. I pulled my legs up to my chest, making myself small, but preparing to run. Or shoot.

"Can't wait to get my hands around your neck." Axel murmured those words, but he was so close that I could hear every one of them. His dark silhouette slipped between the trees, stealing towards me.

"I'd like to see how much whining you can do with your throat slit open."

Axel's boots thumped closer and closer to where I was crouched. My chest squeezed painfully as I resisted the urge to draw in fast, loud gushes of air. Was I a killer? Could I be? The trigger felt slick with all my sweat. So slick my finger could have slipped.

"I was sick of your snotty attitude the day I met you." His dark frame turned. The laugh in his voice told me that he'd seen me. "At least you'll get to see your mommy and your sister again when I'm done making you cry."

I squeezed the trigger; eyes wide, staring into the shadow looming towards me. It took so much more strength than I'd expected to fire the gun. Like the metal was resisting me, begging me not to

turn myself into a person I would hate.

I pressed the trigger back as far as it would go. The gun made a *click* and then nothing. Cold numbness crawled over my skin as I stared up into the face that had terrorized me for as long as I could remember.

His boot smashed into my chest. I flew back. Pain exploded from every cell in my body as he dug into me so fast, I didn't have time to feel each blow before another one came.

I pulled the trigger over and over, *click, click, click.* Axel ripped the gun from my hand, pressed it against my head and fired, sending chills coursing down my spine. A laugh tore out of his throat. He pulled on the metal. Something fell out.

"You fucking idiot." He cracked the gun across my face. "It isn't even loaded." He snatched at the front of my shirt and drew out his own gun. "This one on the other hand..." He stroked the metal over my face. "She's got a bullet with your name on it."

I jerked, twisting out of my loose shirt. He'd kill me. He'd torture me first, but he'd kill me. My fingers squished through mud as I stumbled on all fours, scrambling to my feet. My lungs seared with every inhale as I bolted.

How far was I from Cody's cabin?

The crack of metal across the back of my head knocked me to my knees. Stars. So many stars. Swimming in my vision.

"Where the fuck is my money?" His growl tore through the throbbing in my head.

"It's gone…" My voice sounded weak and distant. "... It's gone."

Pain exploded through my face. I didn't even know what I'd been hit with.

"You're going to fucking pay." More pain. Hot. Blinding. "Been looking awful forward to playing with you again. I always loved the way you squirmed."

Axel dug his knees into my back, grabbed me by the hair and pulled my face into his, forcing me to breath in the stale booze stink of his breath. Those might be the last breaths I'd ever take. I'd always thought I was fighting to get to some kind of better life, but in the end, everything I'd done to survive had just been to get me to this point. Dead.

What a fucking waste.

I unclenched my fists. If I was going to die, I wanted to die the way I'd always wished I could have lived. I wanted to die with some kind of peace.

Axel yanked my hair and slapped me across the face with his loaded gun. I kept my heart beat steady. I looked inside myself for

something warm, something good that I could hold onto when I felt the bullet shatter my skull.

I thought of Cody.

"Mmm, I wanna see you cry one more time." Axel threw me into the dirt and kicked me in the face. "You were always such a fucking cry-baby."

I remembered what Cody had taught me; pain hurts less when you stop fighting. It finally felt true.

A fist cut across my jaw. My heart beat slowly, steadily through the pain. I felt in control. Powerful. For the first time, I was choosing not to fight. Axel couldn't scare me anymore. Nothing could.

A grunt gurgled from my lips. I tasted blood. I thought of the mosquito I'd killed. If only it'd waited a few minutes. The worms and flies would have a feast waiting for them when the sun came up. I tried not to think of that mangled goat buried somewhere off in the woods.

Axel's boot crashed against my temple, sending me sliding through the mud. It was harder to breathe, but I took in ragged inhales as I looked up at the stars. They were so bright. Growing up in the city, I'd always wished I could see the stars at night.

Axel flipped me over with his boot. My arms and legs sprawled heavily in the damp earth. His knee jabbed into my spine and he grabbed me by the hair, ripping my head back.

"Wish I had my knife here." He squeezed my throat. "So I could slit you open." His fingernails dug into my skin. "But you went and stole that too, didn't you?"

I didn't respond. My neck craned far enough that I only saw the stars. They would fade soon. Grey sunlight was bleeding up from the horizon.

"Answer me, you little cunt." He shook my head. "You stole my shit, didn't you?"

I thought of all the sunrises I'd spent watching the light creep across Cody's sleeping face. All those moments I'd spent just soaking him in.

"Beg me." Axel hissed in my ear. "Beg me not to end your sad, sorry little life."

Axel was right. My life had been sad and sorry. At least there had been some beautiful moments... maybe there had been something beautiful in every moment—even that one. The way the stars slowly faded, and the breeze moved through the forest. It sounded almost like something was running through the trees. Running towards us.

Axel punched me in the face, but it didn't hurt. Nothing hurt anymore. He twisted his hand around my throat and squeezed the air out of me. Something in me still begged to make him stop; to fight

him off. But I gently prodded it to be quiet. I was completely in control, even as my head throbbed from lack of oxygen.

The trees shivered. Axel's hands loosened on my throat long enough for my lungs to suck in a gulp of air. It hit me—really hit me, that I was about to die.

And that wasn't what I wanted, but I accepted it. And it didn't hurt.

"C'mon." Axel stood. Slammed his boot down on my back. "You always had so much fight." He kicked my face. "Fight me. Beg me." He tapped my cheek with his gun. "I wanna see you squirm."

I felt so powerful. So in control. That was the moment I wanted to end on.

I closed my eyes, but snapped them open again when I heard the growl. A huge animal came barrelling out through the shadows, flinging itself at us.

No.

It wasn't an animal.

A dark figure collided into Axel—knocking him to the ground and snatching the gun in one fast motion. Then the figure yanked me to my feet and wrapped his body around mine, enveloping me in that mountain of strength I could never forget.

"C'mon. Run." Cody grunted, jerking me so hard, the earth spun around me. Leaves smacked against my face as I tripped over dips and hills, stumbling after him. Cody was stumbling too. I remembered the gash in his leg.

Axel thundered behind us. Cody wouldn't fight him. I knew he wouldn't. He'd never fight anyone again.

Something caught my ankle and I went tumbling down, barely held up by Cody's hand in mine. We hurdled forward. He got three steps before he went down. This time I tried to lift him but I didn't have the strength to pull him up.

All my calm disappeared as Axel caught up to us, laughing. He kicked Cody in the head and ripped the gun from his hand. I wanted to scream at Cody to run. He was going to get himself killed for nothing. I wanted to tell him to turn around and fight. Stop trying to save me. But there was nothing I could do as Axel pulled the trigger.

The explosion shattered my eardrums so I couldn't even hear Cody's agonized groan as he tumbled to the ground. I was pinned under his bulk, feeling warm blood seep from his leg onto mine. Axel's laugh came through muffled by the throbbing pain in my ears.

"That got you squirming." He sounded so far away as he loomed behind us. "Think I should blow his other knee out?"

I raised my hand to Cody's cheek, feeling the dirt and sweat, and mouthed the words, *I'm sorry*. In the end, I'd hurt him. Just like

I'd promised I would. I looked away from the pain in his face. Through the tears burning my eyes, I saw the bear statue I'd crashed into, towering against the graying horizon. We were so close to Cody's cabin, but that shelter we'd hidden in was so far away.

Then I realized—just as the bear dropped onto all fours—I'd driven nowhere near that close to Cody's cabin.

It wasn't a statue.

A smaller shadow loomed next to it. A cub. Something flashed in my mind. Something Cody'd said.

Never threaten a mother's cub.

I grappled in the dirt under me for a stick, a rock, anything. My fingers found something hard and round. I took a gasping breath and let it fly—right past Axel's head, as he flailed and laughed.

Axel raised the gun again, unable to see the enormous shadow charging up behind him. The explosion had left his ears deaf to the snapping twigs until it was too late to react.

An enormous bulk knocked him to the ground. A scream broke through the night before another gunshot stole my hearing again. The bear toppled into Axel. I couldn't tell if it'd been shot. All I saw were flailing limbs and teeth, and fur. I was sure Axel was still screaming, but I only heard one thing.

Get up.

Chapter Twenty-Six
Keep Going

Stumbling. Dark. His weight so heavy. Couldn't stop. I couldn't let him fall. Everything hurt as I shouldered Cody out of the trees into the dim sunrise hitting the dirt road. The bear could've been right on our heels—but the last glimpse I'd stolen before we'd slunk into the forest told me that the beast's attention was consumed with Axel.

A tremor ran up my spine. Axel was gone. The shadow that had followed me for so long had been swallowed up in the sunrise. I gritted my teeth. I had to stay in that moment. Couldn't let shock take over.

Sound finally returned, and I could hear my own agonized breathing, along with Cody's grunts of pain as he did his best to carry his own weight on his uninjured leg. I couldn't hear anything following us. Birds chirped and chattered in the trees, like they had no idea what kind of horror sat below them.

My heart pounded as I pushed us both to reach Cody's SUV parked ten feet in front of Axel's truck. Cody had left his car door gaping open, keys in the ignition. His face became tight with groans as I helped him into the passenger's seat. The blood gushing from his leg

made my head so dizzy, I didn't think I could drive. I put my hand on his, and that made it easier. Had always made it easier.

Cody tore his shirt off and pressed it to the bloody rip in the knee of his pants. Even as his hands shook, his voice stayed calm. So calm.

"I'd never hurt you, Travis."

"I know."

His words became tight and broken. "I'm sorry for everything."

"I know."

"You're angry at me." He didn't take that thought anywhere—like he expected me to finish it for him, but I had no words to express how the earth had been torn open beneath my feet. Angry didn't even come close. Broken was the only way to describe how I felt after seeing who Cody could become. But I knew I was no better than him. And I knew he didn't want to be that person.

He'd rather die.

Cody had saved me. He'd risked his life. He'd die for me. The thought throbbed in my head like the aftershock of an earthquake.

I couldn't think about it. I couldn't break down yet. I had to keep going until I got him to the hospital. I barely had the strength to drive, let alone talk.

"We don't need to do this right now," I said.

"Yeah we do." Cody grunted, shifting like he was trying to twist away from the pain devouring him. "Because I can't go into the hospital knowing you won't be waiting for me when I get out."

I put a trembling hand over his. "I won't be waiting for you, because I won't leave you. Not for a second."

Some of the pain seemed to fade from his voice. "You've always been so much sweeter than I deserved."

I held Cody's hand until the surgery room doors slammed in my face, and then I held my breath until he woke up from the anesthesia. My body ached with bruises, but I'd refused the nurses. I had to be there when he woke up. I had to know he was okay.

I suffocated in my worry for two hours until a smile crept across his sleeping face. Even in a moment like that, his mind only filled with good dreams. If only we could've lived in his dream forever.

His eyelashes fluttered open. "Good morning, lovely," he said groggily, like he'd forgotten everything that'd happened and thought he was waking up in his own bed.

"It's the afternoon." My anxiety melted into puddles of joy that filled my chest until it was hard to speak. "And you said you weren't going to call me that again."

"I said I'd try not to." He rubbed his eyes as he sat up.

“Sometimes I can’t hold back.”

“Are you hungry?” I passed him the tray of baked potatoes and chicken that had been brought up to the room an hour ago. I’d been doing everything I could to hold back from devouring it as he slept. If I’d had any money, I would’ve gone down to the cafeteria, but I wasn’t going to go through Cody’s wallet while he underwent knee surgery.

“Have you eaten?” He pushed the tray towards me as he bit into a baked potato. The burning emptiness in my gut didn’t let me refuse. My trembling hands dug into the meat, stripping flesh from bone. I didn’t even taste the chicken as I devoured it.

“Guess I’ll have to sell the cabin to pay for this fancy new knee.” He shifted his leg and winced.

I dropped my hands from the torn up chicken carcass.

“Kidding.” He exhaled a long breath. “I already called a broker to list it for sale. Was planning to get out of here all along, but…” He glanced over at me.

“You didn’t want to leave without me.”

“I couldn’t let anything happen to you. I just couldn’t. I never expected you to come back while I was out looking for you. When I saw your car abandoned on the road…” He let out a long sigh, rubbing his palm across the sweat and filth still caked to his face. “I just wish I’d found you sooner. I wish I’d never made you leave.”

Cody gazed out the window before continuing. “Truth is, Travis, I didn’t think I’d ever be able to go back home until I met you. And I’m not sure if I can without you.” He picked at the skin clinging to the chicken bones. “I haven’t felt like the man my parents raised. Not since… Well, not since I met my mother.”

“I’m sorry you thought you couldn’t tell me.” I looked away from his fingers as they toyed with the skeletal remains of the bird that was now churning in my gut. “Tell me there’s a reason for all the bad things you did.”

“Stop asking me to lie to you.” He closed his eyes and leaned into his pillow, suddenly exhausted. “I’m not the guy you wanted me to be. Never was. And I guess I’m sorry for that, too. But if you ask me to lie to you, I probably will. I’d do anything you ask. ”

“How is it that easy for you to lie?”

“It’s not.” He blew out a long breath. “It’s really fucking hard.”

I knew what he meant. It’d gotten so hard towards the end. To convince myself it was all true.

“Why did you do what you did?” Maybe I was asking for an excuse. I still wanted to believe that Cody was the man he said he couldn’t be.

“At first, I really thought I was fixing shit for people. Collecting debts. Scaring off stalkers. Didn’t think how it could backfire.” He

exhaled. “And then it did. I beat on the wrong guy. He belonged to a nasty gang. They said they’d let me off the hook if I did some jobs for them… Started to scare myself with the shit I was willing to do.”

“What did you do?”

“I don’t wanna—”

“Tell me.”

“Beat the shit out of people. Collected money any way I had to.”

“Cody…”

“It’s a fucking horrible thing to do. I get that now. Believe me, I do. The violence didn’t seem like a big deal at first, one of those facts of life, but then I got myself into situations I couldn’t control. I was stupid. So fucking stupid. I don’t want to think about how far it could’ve gone.”

“You’d never kill anyone.”

“I know.” His confidence was reassuring. “I bought the gun, because I started worrying about you. Worrying who might be looking for you. But I could never bring myself to put any fucking bullets in it. I guess it scared me to think I might end up using it.” He put his hand hesitantly in mine. “I’d rather die than hurt you, Travis.”

“I know.”

Something sat in my gut like a lead brick. I wanted to call it anger, but it was so unlike any anger I’d ever felt. It wasn’t blinding, twisting rage; it was a quiet ache. Maybe it wasn’t anger at all. Maybe it was just pain. Or maybe the blinding rage had been pain and I was feeling anger for the first time in my life. I didn’t fucking know.

I wondered if the mother bear had gotten hurt because of me. I thought of Axel lying dead, torn up, eaten. I tried not to look at the chicken carcass as Cody picked the last shreds of flesh from it. It could’ve been my own bones being picked clean. So easily.

“I know I can never earn your trust back.” Cody’s sigh sounded so resigned. “But I hope you’ll forgive me. Some day.”

“I think life is hard. And I think it’s easy to fuck up.” I rubbed my fingers over my tattoo, remembering how much it hurt when it was seared into my skin. “That doesn’t mean I forgive you. I don’t know if I will, or if I can, or what that really even means. But what I mean is… I’ve fucked up before too.” My voice dropped, faltered. “I just don’t know how you could do something so sick. Hurting people. Lying.”

“Neither do I.” He puffed his cheeks as tension exploded from his chest in a long breath. “I’ve been lost for a while. Started to forget who I was. Then I found out that the person I am, well, he’s not a great guy.”

“You’re wrong. The sweet, considerate man who taught me to

feel good—to love—that was you. You can't tell me that wasn't you, Cody."

"Nobody's ever called me sweet before." Tiny creases formed around his eyes.

"Well, you are." The lead brick in my gut grew so much heavier. I'd wanted to love Cody. Wanted it so fucking bad. "There were a lot of lies we both told, but there was something there that was real. And I don't want to let that go."

"While we're being honest, I'll go ahead and say that loving you felt like the only good thing I've ever done."

"I don't think I can stop loving you." I dropped my hand into his. "I don't think I want to stop either."

"I'm never going to promise you anything again."

"That sounds like another weird promise." I couldn't help my lips twisting upward.

"What I mean is, I'm not going to promise that everything will be okay if you give me a second chance."

That was exactly what I wanted to hear. Because it was the truth. For the first time, Cody wasn't trying to pretend.

"I trusted you with everything I had." The cut in my lip burnt as I ran my tongue over it. "And I'm not even sure if I ever stopped trusting you... I can't blame you for wanting to pretend everything's perfect."

"I wasn't pretending when I said you were perfect." He squeezed my hand and looked right into my eyes. "You're perfect, Travis."

"I never needed you to be perfect." Everything finally clicked. "I can love you with all your scars and regrets."

Cody's lips fell open. His eyes searched mine, like he couldn't comprehend what I'd said.

I spoke softly. "And if you love me, I want you to love me with all my scars and regrets, too. I don't want you to pretend I'm perfect anymore. I'm not. I've fucked up and so have you."

"I meant you're perfect for me."

"Oh." My heart slowed. "I guess I kinda knew that."

We slipped into silence, and suddenly all the aches in my body had me wishing I hadn't shoved off the nurses who'd tried to ply me with pain killers. The worst pain was gone, though—that bitter ache that'd squeezed down on me so hard, I'd thought my bones would crack.

I stroked the back of Cody's hand and looked down at his knee. "Think you'll still be able to show me around if I came back to Alaska with you?"

"Might take a while." He grimaced.

"I want to come back with you, Cody. I want to see where you grew up. I want to help you remember who you are."

"You already have." The sunshine of his smile washed over me like it had the first morning I'd met him.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Home

"What's so funny?" I looked away from the mountains dominating the horizon to see a grin plastered across Cody's face.

"Just like seeing things through your eyes." He drummed his hands on the steering wheel of the rented car. "I should take you down to the coast some time. That'll really blow your mind."

Cody rolled down the window and inhaled deeply.

"Smells like dirt." I sniffed the pungent air.

"Smells like home." His smile widened, but there was a nervousness in his eyes. "Hope my mom cooked enough dinner." He scratched the back of his head. "I didn't exactly tell her we were coming."

"Your parents love you, Cody." I put my hand over his. "And I love you."

"I love you too." His shoulders relaxed. "I love you more than I ever knew possible."

"You have no idea how much that means to me."

"I know exactly what it means to you. It means the same to me."

He ran his hand up and down the back of my neck. I went back to marveling at the rambling mountains towering above the thick pine trees. We finally turned down a long gravel drive, and nostalgia hit me. It was so much like the drive leading up to Cody's cabin. Had he been trying to recreate the home he couldn't return to? The small house the car stopped in front of already felt familiar.

"You ready to meet my crazy parents?" He laughed nervously.

"Are *you* ready?"

"I'm ready to go anywhere with you."

I got out and fished his crutches from the back seat. Cody sighed as he hoisted his weight onto them. Limping around had been really cramping his style of barrelling head first into everything in his path.

We hobbled up to the door. Cody paused. Looked at the ground, then looked at me. His face made me think he might drop his crutches and bolt off on his busted knee.

"You parents have missed you long enough." I rapped my

knuckle against the wood.

"What're you doing?" He grabbed my hand. "I'm not going to knock at my own house." He dropped my hand and took a breath as he flung the door open.

The warmth of the house hit me. The sizzling stove. The embroidered quilts hanging on the walls. Everything about the place said, *home.*

"Hope you saved a place for me." Cody said to the small woman setting out plates on the worn table. The ceramic plate slipped from her hand and shattered on the wood floor.

"Gee, 'ma, you're so clumsy."

"Oh, Cody." She barely came up to his chest when she threw her arms around him, squeezing him like she'd never let go.

"You cook enough dinner for me?"

"We've been cooking dinner for you for the past five years." A thin man walked into the room and stole Cody from his mother. "Good of you to finally show up."

"Sorry I'm late." Cody murmured, leaning his head into his father's shoulder. He sniffed in a sharp breath as he pulled away. "You got Trav to thank for why I'm back." Cody smacked a huge hand on my shoulder. "Sold his car to buy the plane tickets."

"It's Travis," I said quickly. "And that's not why I sold my car."

"Thank you for bringing my son back." His mother's body enveloped me, pinning my arms to my sides as she squeezed me like a boa constrictor. For such a tiny woman, she could've crushed the life out of me.

"Marria, why don't you grab some extra plates." The dad laughed as he fished a broom out of a cluttered closet off the kitchen and went to work sweeping up the mess Cody's mother had made.

"Never told me I had a brother." Cody's brows closed in curiously at the mouse-like boy climbing into a chair at the table.

"Danny is one of my students," the dad said. "He's been staying with us for a while." He turned to the little boy who looked like he wanted to hide under the table. "This is that awful son I told you about, and his friend Travis."

"It's very nice to meet you, Cody and Travix," Danny mumbled quietly, stuttering over my name as he kept his gaze in his lap.

"I don't bite." Cody plunked down in a chair, and grabbed a roll from the basket of bread in the middle of the table, making Danny crouch back even further in his chair.

"It's nice to meet you too, Danny." I sat down next to him, as if to protect him from the dominating force that was Cody.

"Travis, do you prefer red or white wine?" Cody's mother asked as she set a plate in front of me.

“Umm, no thank you.” I shook my head, a bit disoriented, and frankly overwhelmed.

It became so obvious where Cody learned to cook as I bit into the pasta in front of me. His mother leaned in to hug Cody one more time before she sat down to eat. It was obvious where Cody learned a lot of things.

“How did you break your leg?” Danny asked, eyeing Cody’s crutches leaning against the table.

Cody rubbed the back of his head. “Wasn’t being careful.”

Danny nodded knowingly. “I fell down the stairs once ‘cause I was running.” He wrinkled his face up, like the memory was still too fresh in his mind. “Got a bloody nose.”

“Gotta watch what you’re doing, right?”

“I’ve kept your apartment above the studio vacant,” Cody’s dad said.

“Thought you might.”

“And of course your old job’s still open.”

“That means a lot to me.” Cody pressed his lips together and looked down at his plate.

After we ate, Cody’s parents took Danny upstairs to get ready for bed, then we sat in the cozy living room as Cody told them everything. Meeting his mother; the year he spent wandering aimlessly; the job he took at a collections agency; the bad decisions he made after that; me.

The gleam in his mother’s eyes betrayed the tears she was holding back. His father listened with a reflective expression as Cody told them all but the darkest details. When Cody finished, his father unfolded his hands and put them over Cody’s.

“I’m sorry you felt so lost.” There was such an ache behind his father’s words. “I wish you’d told me sooner instead of pretending everything was fine.”

“Yeah, I wish that too.” Cody looked down at his father’s hand on his own.

“Thank you for coming home.”

“Thanks for waiting for me.”

Before we left, Cody’s mother crushed me in her arms and whispered in my ear, “Thank you for bringing my son home.”

It was ten p.m., but the sun was only just starting to fade. The warmth of the home still kindled under my skin as we drove back out through the trees, to the small town nearby. Cody parked the car outside a large square building off the main street, and led the way inside.

“What is this place?” I looked around at the huge space, full of every instrument I could imagine. And some I couldn’t have imagined

existing.

"It's my dad's studio. He teaches music lessons."

Cody hobbled to a large wooden door at the back of the studio, sighing as he looked through the door up at the flight of stairs.

"Wake up call comes early. You probably won't like that." He grunted as he climbed the stairs on his crutches. "Nothing like an off-tune french horn to get you out of bed… hope I don't have to listen to you cursing all morning."

Dust motes spun lazily in the last of the sunset seeping through the window. The dust fell on everything, from the wood floor, to the worn couch, to the packed bookshelf. Clean dishes sat in the drying rack next to the sink—an eerie reminder that the occupant had left intending to return soon.

"Forgot how small this place was."

Cody led the way down the small hall, into the bedroom. His crutches clattered to the floor as collapsed into the bed.

"Could use some clean sheets," he muttered, but climbed into them none the less.

"How's your knee?"

"Fucked."

"No, I mean, does it hurt?"

"Mmhmm."

"You'll have to find a physiotherapist in the area. I wish you woulda stayed to keep your post-op appointment with the surgeon."

"You know why we had to get out of there, Trav… and besides, I stayed gone long enough." He let out a long sigh, sending dust billowing through the air. "I was ready to come home."

I climbed into bed beside him and laid my head on his chest. There was a soft ache in his heartbeat. How had I not heard that before? All of Cody's lies had been crutches he'd used to get through life when the ache became too much to bear. I wished he'd let me shoulder some of that weight.

I leaned onto my elbows and looked into his eyes. "You know, after everything. I think you're the one who never trusted me."

"I trusted you with my heart. My soul. Everything."

"Except you didn't." I shook my head sadly. "You didn't trust me to take care of you. You didn't trust that I was strong enough to share your pain."

Slow realization spread over his expression. "I'm sorry."

The contours of his face were so sharp in the dimming light. I pressed my chest against his so that our heartbeats pounded against one another, making one song out of their separate rhythms. My lips brushed his as I whispered, "I forgive you." I pressed just a little closer. "But you can't ever let yourself get lost like that again. Ever."

“I wish you’d found me so much sooner.” Cody kissed me as he swallowed a tight gulp.

“Well I’m here now.” I slid my hand in his and tangled our fingers together. “And I’m not going anywhere. Not without you.”

His lips captured me, dominating me. Everytime I tried to speak, he stole the words from my mouth with his kiss. I fought back, sliding his hands above his head. If Cody wouldn’t let me speak with words, I’d have to express myself another way.

I stripped our shirts off, and kissed down his torso, finding all the most tender places. His strong hands clasped my shoulders, but I pushed them to the side. I wouldn’t let him direct this moment. I was in control.

I slid his pants off, careful of the raw, ripped up skin behind his knee. Anticipation glowed in his eyes as I moved between his legs. His hands flew to my shoulders, but he dropped them to his sides almost as quickly. Hard as it was for him, he was giving his control to me. He’d always been so generous. There wasn’t a thing in the world he wouldn’t have given me.

He handed over all the aching moans in his chest as I slickened his shaft with my lips; licking; sucking; tasting; demanding. Cody gifted me with his heady climax as he groaned out, over and over, “... so perfect.”

His hands flew around me, drawing me up to his face. He kissed me deeply with the taste of his pleasure still on my lips, mingling between our tongues. I pulled back to compose myself. Couldn’t let him steal control. Not yet.

I took my pants off and kneeled over his slickened cock, still hard and begging even after I’d swallowed all his release. The look on his face was so beautiful. Resignation. He was prepared to trust me with everything.

I slid down slowly, savouring the aching stretch that always came with him entering my body. Cody lay moaning, trembling beneath me, struggling to keep from taking me hard and wild. It would’ve been easier on him if I’d bound him to the bed—which was why I hadn’t. His eyes widened with agonized pleasure as I moved slowly up and down his stiff cock, until I stopped completely, just letting him twitch and throb inside of me, begging for friction. Cody’s moan trembled from his lips as I began stroking myself off. I gazed down at the emotion in his eyes as I moaned out and came in thick gushes that glistened on his torso.

Cody leaned his head back and yelled out through grit teeth. “So. Fucking. Perfect.”

His thighs trembled as he lost control completely, letting everything go as he came inside me. I collapsed into him, wrapping

my arms tight around his neck, not letting go, even as the sweat on our bodies grew cold.

After a long silence, Cody slid his arms around me, and slowly shifted me off him so that my back pressed into his chest, and he enveloped me in his arms as we slid into soft sleep.

Morning came with a crash.

The roar of the piano downstairs didn't seem to even make Cody twitch from his sleep, but it pulled me out of bed at the ungodly hour of nine in the morning. Cody must've taken a pain pill to not hear the noise—that, or he was used to it from so long ago. I left Cody in his coma and showered, before wandering downstairs to investigate the noise coming from the studio.

"Did we wake you?" The music cut off abruptly as Cody's father looked up from the piano. He sat on the bench with Danny by his side. "You must have more sensitive ears than Cody. He said the noise never bothered him."

I laughed and shook my head. "That sounds nice."

"Why don't you sit with Danny while I get ready for my class coming in? Unless you've got something else you need to be doing." The father stood, giving Danny a little squeeze on the shoulder.

"Uh, no, I'd love to."

Danny kicked his legs as I sat next to him. His fingers *plunk, plunk, plunked* along the keys in what was maybe a rhythm.

"That's really good." I smiled at the way his tongue pressed between his lips in concentration.

"James taught me." He beamed, looking over at Cody's father. "He came to my school to teach us about instrument," he said the last word stumbling over the syllables. "I told him I wanted to be a musician like him, but my mom would never be able to buy me all those nice instruments." He blew out a long breath, plunking his finger down on a deep note.

"Then what happened?" I asked, feeling there was a lot more to the story.

"James said I could come to his studio whenever I want. My mom used to live right around the corner, so he could pick me up or I could walk over."

"Where's your mom now?" I asked quietly, regretting it immediately.

"She's in jail." He nibbled his lip in a way that made me want to wrap my arms around him. "It's my fault. She said if I ever told, then I would lose her, but I told anyways."

I didn't have to ask what he'd told. I knew exactly what it was

like to be that scared kid, knowing that seeking help would mean betraying everything safe and familiar.

"I think you're really brave, Danny. It's not your fault that your mom got into trouble, and you did the right thing. You deserve to have someone take care of you. "

He nodded seriously and looked back down at the piano—then back up as the door to the stairs opened and Cody creaked in on his crutches that seemed to be protesting his weight with every step.

"Will you play, Cody?" Danny sat up straight, excited, but wary, like he was meeting an exotic animal. "Your dad said you're really good on the piano."

I looked to Cody in surprise. "You never told me you knew piano."

"Haven't felt like playing in a long time." He smiled wryly.

I stood so he could plop down on the piano bench.

He took a long breath and exhaled a sigh from deep within his lungs before his fingers began dancing over the keys. Soft notes bounced off the walls, stealing every scrap of my attention. Cody's eyes closed as the airy melody transported him somewhere deep inside himself; a place he'd been afraid to go for a long time.

When the song came to an end, Danny clapped, bouncing in his seat. "That was great!" He turned to me. "Can you play music Travins?"

I couldn't help smiling as his poor little tongue butchered my name. "You can just call me Trav." I shook my head. "I don't know how to play anything."

"Maybe Cody will teach you." His father said from across the room where he was fiddling with music sheets. "I was afraid you might've gotten rusty. Glad to see you'll have no problem picking back up where you left off." He grinned up at Cody. "In fact, you could probably teach this class coming in."

"You teach music too?"

"I guess there's a lot about myself I should've told you." He stared down at his hands on the piano keys.

"You've got your whole life to tell me everything." I squeezed his shoulder. "Let me take you out for breakfast."

"Trav, you don't have any money." He looked up laughing.

"I have some left from selling my car," I said defensively.

Cody laughed. "Breakfast is on me. You can pick up the tab when we find you a job."

We drove to a diner oddly called "Waffles" and Cody eyed me over his plate of sickeningly sweet pancakes.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"This feels really normal."

"Is that a bad thing?"

I shook my head. "I've just never really felt normal before. I feel like I could just be a regular guy sitting here, you know? With a job… a life..." I trailed off instead of listing more boring things.

"Is that what you want?"

"I've never really let myself want anything." My heart squeezed. "Until I met you."

"Well, start wanting things, because I'm going to give them to you. I'm going to give you everything you could ever want." He stopped and corrected himself. "I'm going to try."

"I just want for us to be happy."

"Then I've already come through on my end." He squeezed my hand. "I'm so fucking happy when I'm with you."

Epilogue

The Dreams We Made Reality

Waking up next to Travis every morning still felt like a dream. It'd been over two years since he'd found me alone in the woods, half-dead from self-loathing. He'd wandered in with his gnawed on lip and his bashed up heart and reminded me how fucking beautiful life can be. Travis reminded me what it was like to love—reminded me I was capable of love —and worthy of love.

"She's so small." Travis stared down, awe struck, at the tiny bundle in his arms.

"Well, what did you think a baby was?" I tried not to laugh at his wide eyes and speechless lips.

"I dunno…" It was clear he wasn't thinking as he spoke. "You're just giving her to us?" He looked up at the aid worker who'd helped us through Danny's adoption—as if he'd just remembered she was in the room.

Liza smiled. "We'd prefer to have her placed as quickly as possible, and you'd expressed that you want to expand your family."

"But…" Travis stroked the tiny fingers, his gaze sliding to the signed paperwork like he couldn't believe he wasn't dreaming. "You're just *giving* her to us."

"Her mother forfeited her parental rights a few hours before we called you, and I can't think of a better home in our system for her to go to."

"Who would ever give her up?" Travis shook his head in disbelief.

"Life is complicated." Liza smiled wryly.

Travis nodded without looking up.

"Let's get this stuff in the car before the snow comes. It's supposed to get nasty tonight." I grabbed one of the bags of baby supplies that we'd have to figure out how to use.

"Should you be lifting those? Your knee gets bad in cold weather."

"Just aches a bit." I shook my head. "Nothing big."

"I admire your fearlessness—taking in a new baby on Christmas Eve."

"We're more stupid than fearless." I peeked into the bag I held. We'd been taking infant care courses ever since Travis'd said he wanted to adopt a second child, but there's a huge difference between learning this stuff, and actually doing it.

Travis looked up at me and laughed. "Don't tell me you're intimidated for the first time in your life."

"Intimidated? Me? Do you even know me?"

"Too well." Travis rose, carefully placing our daughter in the carseat.

Our Daughter.

Holy shit.

We hugged Liza and thanked her before bundling out to the car. Snow drifted down from the glowing night sky as I drove.

"We'll have to get a bigger house…" Travis thought out loud as he gazed at the carseat in the rearview mirror.

"Mmhm."

"You'll have to keep me from spoiling her…"

"I already knew that."

The Christmas tree waiting at home was barely visible for all the gifts Travis had piled under it, but I tried not to hold him back too much. He'd never had the opportunity to provide for the people he loved. I couldn't blame him for going overboard sometimes.

He sat back in his seat, smiling so wide I thought his face might crack open. "Last night I dreamed you gave me every star in the sky."

I laughed. "What would you do with stars?"

"I dunno. It was just a dream."

"You're an interesting guy, Trav."

He twisted back around to stare at the car-seat. "Can't believe her mom didn't even give her a name."

"Maybe she knew she'd be letting her go. They say you're not supposed to name anything you plan on setting free. Makes it too hard." I reached over and stroked the soft little hairs on the back of his neck. "But I think you chose a good name for her. Madeline is perfect."

"We can call her Maddy for short."

“Mmhmm.”

My knee wasn’t the only thing that had healed over the past two years. It had taken a lot of counseling, and working on ourselves before Travis had felt ready to complete the adoption with Danny. He’d wanted to know we’d do things right. The process had been hard, but seeing his confidence blossom was like feeling the warmest spring day after a long, long winter.

Of course there were still cold days when things ached.

Travis could never forget his family or the life he’d lost before we built this one. Those were the times when he’d cuddle Danny close. The nights when I held him while he cried. The hard days reminded me how fucking beautiful he was. How deeply he felt everything.

He'd started channelling all that feeling into writing—telling stories of all the things that'd hurt him. His stories were always bizarre, people turning into animals, and wild fantasy. But they always had happy endings, and I loved reading all the things he dreamed up.

He loved cooking for our own little family. Loved showing how much he cared. Travis cared more than anyone I’d ever met. His soul glowed so bright that looking into his eyes was almost blinding. God knows it left me stumbling blind.

Soft light glowed from the window of my parents’ house. My mom had practically bawled her face off with joy when I told her we’d sleep over so we could spend Christmas morning at their house. Actually, she had bawled her face off.

“We didn’t get Madeline a Christmas present.” Travis stopped in his tracks as he walked up to the house carrying the carseat.

“She can have all of mine.” I laughed, opening the door.

“Some of your Christmas gifts aren’t meant for children.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Not like that!”

“Damn.”

I didn’t try to tear Travis away from staring down into Madeline’s bassinet as she slept. His expression still asked the question he couldn’t stop repeating. ‘*Someone just* gave *her to us?’*

I crept out of the dark bedroom, into the kitchen, and dug our half-eaten plates of food from the fridge. We’d rushed out when we got the call from the adoption agency, leaving our dinner barely touched. I popped the food in the microwave, finally drawing Travis away from the bassinet with the smell of food. I smiled as I saw his sweet, dazed expression. There was no way the gift I’d gotten him would come close to comparing to this early Christmas present.

The house was silent as we sat down to eat. The morning

would bring chaos of tears and joy. Travis set his fork down, and I could tell the butterflies in his stomach were making it hard for him to swallow. He could never eat when he got excited.

"I love you."

"I know." I did everything I could to not laugh. "I love you, too."

"I know." His grin spread even wider.

My laugh broke out of me. I stood to put our plates in the dishwasher as quietly as I could. "Careful, you're gonna bust your face smiling like that."

"But you could fix it if I did, right?" Travis snuck up behind me and tickled the back of my neck. "You can fix anything."

"You've never needed anyone to fix you." I grabbed his wrist and tugged him into my body. "You've always been perfect."

I inhaled his soft scent as I pressed my lips to his. He kissed me back, his body molding into mine like he was made for me. Sometimes it was hard to believe that he wasn't made just for me. Me for him. I closed my eyes and put my forehead to his, murmuring into his lips the truth I could never hide.

"So perfect."

End.

***

But wait—there's more!

Keep reading to see the a bonus chapter from Cody's perspective.

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Chapter One
The Night He Found Me

Hot water cascaded down my body, but couldn't seem to wash off the sweat and filth clinging to me. I rubbed the bar of soap over my skin, but still felt so fucking dirty. I chugged back on my beer, not really caring that water from the shower had gotten into the bottle. The numb feeling I got from drinking was the only thing that made me feel close to clean.

It seemed like the harder I tried to become a person who I could stand, the more reasons I found to hate who I was. I could almost appreciate the irony of it all.

Almost.

A groan ached up from the bottom of my chest. It felt like it'd been sitting there for years.

I shut the shower off, dried myself, and fumbled downstairs for another beer. I'd missed three calls while I was in the shower. None of them from people I wanted to talk to. Offering such unique services meant I got a lot of referrals. Sure, I could say no—should've a long time ago—but the more I slid down this path, the more I felt like this was *me*.

I chugged back on my beer.

A text from my dad's number flickered on the screen.

'*Haven't heard from you in a while. Everything okay? Love you, Mom and Dad.'*

For one second, I smiled, thinking of how long it would've taken him to type that short message out on his ancient flip phone… then I remembered it'd been years since I'd seen him. Maybe he'd gotten a new phone. Maybe he'd become a tech wiz. It seemed like such small shit, but it was all that small shit that made me feel so far from my family.

God knows I'd changed in a thousand ways since I'd seen them last. It seemed like every day, I peeled back a new layer of myself and found something even uglier underneath. The cold condensation on the beer bottle dripped down my palm as images of what I'd done that night flashed in my mind.

I'd beaten the junky to a blithering mess of tears and moans… and the worst part was… it was just for money. A stupid drug debt. The first guys I'd beat on had been stalkers, dead beats, horrible people who'd done horrible things. That was what'd made it easy. Too easy. I'd slid into my new identity before I'd even realized what I was doing.

I took another long drink, feeling the warm blurring effects of

my fifth… or… sixth beer of the night. I looked back at my dad's text and wrote, *Everything's fine.*

Something about that read like a cry for help, so I added.

I love you too.

For some reason, hitting *send* left me exhausted. I dropped the phone to the couch and gazed up at the bookshelf. I'd been determined to pick up all the pieces of myself that had been shattered after I'd met my mother, but reading all these books, trying to dissect what the fuck was wrong with me, had only left me feeling more broken. I'd scheduled an appointment with a therapist years ago, but I couldn't make myself talk about it. I'd just ended up lying my ass off in the session, and it didn't really make sense to keep going to a therapist if I was going to lie about why I was there in the first place.

I'd always thought I could climb any mountain, but I was starting to realize that I didn't know a damned thing about myself.

Well, there was one thing I knew about myself at that moment. I was fucking starving. I was too tired to cook, and soon I'd probably be too drunk as well. I picked my phone back up, searched, '*Pizza delivery,'* and dialed the first number that came up. The old man who answered the phone said they were closing for the night, but when I'd drunkenly offered to pay triple the cost, he called out, "Hey, Baby-Face, don't leave yet, I got another delivery for you."

I chuckled as I hung up. Baby-Face. Couldn't wait to meet the guy.

I grabbed another beer from the fridge, and then another, and another, finally losing count as I slipped into a sloppy sleep.

My head ached when I opened my eyes. I rubbed my face, wondering how much time had disappeared. Where the fuck was my pizza?

It felt like morning, and I felt like shit. Not hungover. Chewed up and disgusting. I shouldn't've let myself drink that much—I shouldn't've *wanted* to drink that much. Every day there was another layer of myself…

My gut felt too unsettled from the beer to to eat anything, so I slurped back a glass of water, slipped my boots on and wandered out the front door. I usually felt better when I got outside. Not good, but better. The throbbing in my head eased up as the fresh air hit me. I inhaled the scent of dirt and trees, and pretended for one second that I was home, that I'd never left.

The cold morning seeped into my bones as I tromped through the brush, making as much noise as I could, to tell any bears to get the fuck out of my way. My empty gut twisted so hard, I probably would've eaten a grizzly if I saw it. I was about to turn back to the house—when I spotted the crash.

That fucking statue. I knew I should've ripped it down before someone hurt themselves.

The kid inside the car was out cold. I tapped on the window, but he didn't move.

Fuck

I tore the door open—thank God it wasn't locked. I was about to check for a pulse, when his eyes snapped open. The widest, bluest eyes I'd ever seen in my life. He twisted out of his seat, scrambling away from me like he thought I was going to eat him.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

The kid looked too scared to even respond.

"Are you hurt?"

When he only shook his head in response, I had to wonder if he spoke any English. My stomach grumbled angrily when I realized he was sitting on my pizza.

Well, that explained what he was doing there.

By the mess of blankets and clothes in the back seat, I had to guess his car was also his home. Whoever the fuck this kid was, he had problems.

I stuck my hand out to him, and when he only cowered further, I had to resist the urge to laugh. The poor thing was so helpless. I grabbed onto him and pulled him from the car. He stood shakily and seemed to be dizzy.

"You're hurt," I said slowly, because I still wasn't sure he could understand me.

"Just sick. Not hurt." There was no accent in his short sentence, so I squashed my theory that he was some kind of European migrant worker. Probably a runaway teen. Whoever he was, he definitely didn't have his shit together.

I grabbed the pizza and invited him inside, but he just stood there blinking at his crashed car, like he had no idea what he was looking at.

"Are you coming?" I asked, more to get him moving than as a question. I knew he was coming. What else was he going to do—wander through the forest until he got eaten by a bear?

He stood there for another minute, staring around with his bambi eyes, before limping after me. Fuck, this kid was either hurt or seriously sick. The short walk up to the house would take hours if I had to wait for him to stumble behind me. I handed him the box of pizza, resisting the urge to grin at the way he looked at me with confusion. I grabbed him by the waist and shoulders and pulled him up into my body. The vulnerability in his face when he stared up at me was fucking delicious.

"You don't have to—"

“Relax,” I said, feeling a small thrill when he did. His head leaned into my chest and his eyes closed. It was a lot easier to carry him than it should’ve been. He was beyond thin. The way his ribs protruded from his sides made my hunger pains even worse.

“What’s your name, kid?”

He didn’t answer. He looked like he’d fallen asleep in my arms. Part of me wanted to laugh, but there was something else—something tender rising up inside of me. I gripped him tighter. I wanted to hold on to that feeling.

He didn’t wake up until I lay him on the couch, and the first thing he said was, “Sorry about your statue.”

I could’ve laughed again. I really was warming to this weird little creature. “Do you want me to call a tow truck?”

“I don’t really have money to pay for a tow truck.”

Of course he didn’t.

“I’ll pay for the towing.”

He tried to protest, but I shut him up and offered him a slice of pizza. He looked like he could eat the whole thing to himself, but just shook his head, and said, “I don’t eat meat.”

What the fuck?

I had to wonder if he was delirious or out of his mind as he rambled on, “I read this study that said pigs recognize their own reflection, horses can read expressions, and cows have best friends.”

“Sounds like a terrible use of a scientist's time,” I said, biting through a thick slice of pepperoni.

His brows furrowed together like he was thinking hard. “I don’t want to kill something with feelings. I don’t want to eat someone’s best friend.”

Was I listening to this? Was I seriously talking to a guy who was so fucking sweet, he was afraid he might accidentally eat a cow's best friend? I set my food down. There was something about him that I liked. That tenderness. Really, it was something I wished I had.

My stomach grumbled ferociously, and I stopped thinking as I stuffed another bite of pizza in my mouth. “Nothing left now, but to eat it—maybe this cow didn’t have friends. Maybe he was an asshole.

“I can’t take that chance.”

This kid seemed to have the idea that everyone and everything was worthy of life. What a novel concept. He swallowed, and the agony in his face almost made my own throat hurt in sympathy. For such a pretty face, he was hard to look at.

“Open your mouth.”

He got that dazed look like he couldn’t speak English again, so I repeated, slower, and more forcefully, “I said open your mouth.”

He looked like he thought I was going to eat him as I stood.

The kid seemed incapable of telling people from animals, so he probably really did think I would eat him. I put my hand on his smooth chin as I looked into his swollen throat with my cell phone. A pang of sympathy hit me. This guy was hanging by a thread.

"You have strep throat."

"Are you a doctor?"

For a second, I considered saying yes. I mean, it would've been easier than explaining what my real profession was. There was no way a kid like this would understand. He'd probably go running off screaming if I told him I beat the shit out of people for money. Finally, I just said the truth, "I've had strep before."

I remembered when I was in highschool, my dad had mixed me brandy and honey when I'd had strep, and my mom lost her shit on him for giving me booze when I was antibiotics—nevermind that he'd given me booze at all—we'd both gotten a firm lecture about misusing antibiotics, and to that day, I couldn't forget it. The memory filled me with something warm.

The kid on my couch looked like he was falling asleep again, so I poked around in the kitchen. I made sure to wash my hands first. Fuck, I did not want to get strep again. Digging out some brandy was no problem, but I couldn't seem to scrape any honey from the empty jar in the cupboard. Ah, well, I'd just tell him it was brandy and honey. It was probably all the placebo effect anyway.

He startled awake as I plunked the brandy and not-honey on the table.

"Drink," I said before biting back into the shitty pizza. It probably would've tasted just as bad if it hadn't been cold and sat on. Fast food just has that fake taste, like there's no soul in it.

He was still looking at the glass like he'd never seen a cup before. "What is it?"

"Brandy and honey," I lied. "It'll help your throat."

When he just kept staring at it, I grabbed it and took a long sip, almost just to show him what humans are supposed to do with cups. I restrained another laugh. It was like I'd found some kind of forest child that'd never met another person before.

He looked like he was going to grab for the glass when I set it down, but he just tucked his hands under his body and shook his head. "I don't drink."

The fuck? Didn't realize that was an option.

I swiped the glass off the table and downed it. "I'll take you to the doctor when the office opens. Until then, sleep."

He got that dopey look again.

"You have strep. You need antibiotics."

He looked scared, like he didn't want to accept my help. Well,

that was never one of the choices I was going to give him.

"I'm not going to let a sick kid wander into my house and leave without getting help." I liked hearing those words from my mouth. I liked feeling like I was the kinda guy who would take care of a kid like this.

"I'm not a kid. I'm twenty-three."

He looked seriously embarrassed and it looked cute as hell on him.

"You're sick, though." I resisted the urge to smile. "I told you to sleep."

His eyes started to close immediately. Even though he shied and fluttered at everything I said, he seemed to genuinely want to listen to me. He was a soft trusting guy, but he was scared. I wanted to know what was scaring him so I could bash it to oblivion. He made me feel protective, and I liked knowing there was something like that inside of me.

I slipped quietly out the front door and treaded back to his car. This crash seemed like it was just the most recent in a long line of accidents that'd happened to him. The guy gave the impression that his whole life was one big collision.

I phoned the garage I order parts from, and asked them to send a tow truck for the car. Then I started digging through the shit in his back seat. There was a little camp-stove and some empty food wrappers that made the whole car reek. Of course the guy was too nice to litter when he couldn't find a trash can.

I grabbed a gym bag from the floor and started stuffing shit in it. Clothes, a couple books. When I snatched the sleeping bag up, something tumbled out of it. I bent to pick up the grimy envelope that'd fallen onto the ground, and my brows knit together.

What the fuck was this kid doing carrying so much cash?

The guy had problems. Big problems. Anyone carrying that much money has either done something to get themselves in trouble—or is about to get themselves in trouble.

I pocketed the money, dragged his shit back into the house and washed what I could, though I was a little concerned his ragged clothes would fall apart in the washing machine. I would've liked to've just given him some of my own clothes, but he would've looked ridiculous with my shirt hanging off him—actually, I kinda liked the image.

The kid was still sleeping when I went back out to the living room. I reminded myself to ask his name when he came to. There were a lot of questions I'd be asking.

I figured I'd make salmon for when he woke up, because there was no way he could think a fish had friends. He flinched on the

couch as I clattered in the kitchen, his soft features scrunching up. I let myself smile as I approached him quietly. I scooped him in my arms and he curled into me. God, I liked that. I carried him gently upstairs and laid him in the spare room, resisting the urge to crawl under the covers and squeeze him in my arms. Yeah, it was weird, but he seemed like the kinda guy who could use a hug. And maybe I wanted to see myself as the kind of guy who could give him what he needed.

He rolled over and I noticed he had a tattoo of a bird on his neck. It looked like a dove, but the inked shadows on it were so deep that it was almost completely black. I ran my fingers over it, and felt him stir. I wanted to know more about this guy. A lot more.

I wanted to keep him.

***

About the Author:

Stephen Hoppa is an author of gay romance who sometimes doubts his own existence. He writes sexy stories about boys kissing and more, because he think sex and love are magic. He writes flawed, broken characters who go beyond shades of grey into completely technicoloured morality, because rainbows are the sh*t. (He also writes gratuitous smut...)

You can chat with Stephen on Twitter, where he obsessively shares the music he's listening to while he's writing @StephenHoppa.

Follow Stephen on facebook for so he can let you know when he's got free reads and new releases! https://www.facebook.com/Stephen-Hoppa-145549739143925/

You can find all of Stephen Hoppa's work at:

AMAZON

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More than Words

(Something More: Book One)

By T.T. Kove

Part One

From the Moment We Met

One

September

Three weeks into school and I couldn't take it anymore. Either I was being completely ignored by everyone, even the teachers, or I was being called names because of my looks, my mannerisms, or my scars. One would think I'd prefer being ignored, but it was just as bad as being bullied simply because of the way I was.

So I was cleaning out my locker. My books were in a stack at my feet and I put a couple of folders and loose papers into my rucksack. I didn't have much in my locker, but what I did have I was going to take home with me. No one was going to have to do this for me when I was gone.

I was doing it myself, like I did everything myself.

I bent to put a few of the books into my rucksack as well. It filled up quickly, though, and I wrestled with the zipper for a moment before I managed to close it.

Someone bumped into me from behind, sending me crashing into the lockers. I hit my forehead against the cold metal, and I groaned as I squeezed my eyes shut. *No more*.

I hefted the rucksack on my back, lifted the rest of the books into my arms, and stood up. I closed my locker, but put the padlock in my pocket. No reason to lock it when there was nothing there. When I wasn't coming back.

My rucksack was heavy, and my back was already aching from it, but so were the books I was struggling to hold onto. Why did we have to have so many books, anyway?

"Oi, watch where you're going!"

A thick-set bloke walked right into me, sending all my books tumbling to the ground. He looked at me, shook his head, and walked away.

I couldn't even master the will to look after him in annoyance. Why was he asking me to watch where I was going? He was the one who'd walked into me.

I swallowed heavily, fighting back tears as I bent to pile my books up again.

I could see out of the corner of my eye that someone plucked one of my books up: one that was out of my immediate reach. I reached out for the last book that was lying on the ground, but the person who'd picked up the other one grabbed it before me.

I retracted my hand slowly, then raised my head in trepidation. Either this would be someone messing with me, or

someone helping me. I wasn't sure which one I preferred, but I was dreading it all the same.

"Here." He crouched down and handed me the two books he was holding.

His eyes, a deep shade of brown, met mine. He swam a little before me, as my eyes were filled with tears, but I could still recognise him. Tall, fit, and tanned, with straight blond hair. He was the best mate of one of the arseholes in my class, so I'd seen him in our classroom several times during the two years we'd been in upper secondary school.

"Don't feel bad," he said, cocking his head slightly. "Arseholes like him aren't worth it."

Why is he being nice to me? I lowered my gaze and took the books from his outstretched hands. His fingers brushed mine. They were thicker and more calloused than my slender ones.

I put the two books on top of the ones I was already holding, clutching them to my chest.

"Wow, are you spending your entire weekend studying?" he joked.

I clenched my teeth and clutched tighter to my books. I wasn't going to study. *What would be the point?* I rose to my feet slowly and almost lost my balance because my rucksack was so heavy. I managed to get back up with my dignity mostly intact though.

I glanced up at him, since he'd risen with me, but was still standing there in front of me. What did he want? He watched me and I bowed my head quickly again. Seriously, *what* did he want with me?

"Do you want to walk with me?" He nodded towards the road, which was the only way leading out of the school area. "Or are you taking the bus?"

"No, I—I'm walking." I nodded slightly.

"So you want to walk with me?" He took a step away from me, towards the sidewalk on the other side of the road from the schoolyard.

I hesitated, but walking with him couldn't really hurt, so I eventually followed. He hitched the strap of his bag further up on his broad shoulder, then he turned his head to eye my rucksack. I expected him to make another joke about studying, but he didn't. "I'm Andreas," he said instead. "Andreas Lister."

I already knew his name. "Alex Eknes," I muttered in reply.

He looked at me now, not my rucksack, and it unnerved me. "What year are you in? What class?"

"Third year. I'm in Glenn's class." Glenn was the tosser of a best mate he had. I couldn't believe he could be so nice while being friends with someone who could be so nasty.

"You know Glenn?"

I shuddered at the mere thought. "No, not really." I shrugged and glanced over at him. This was the third year I was in the same class as Glenn, but I didn't think I'd ever had a proper conversation with him. "I know you're mates, though. I've seen you together." Did that sound a bit stalker-ish? Hell, why did it even matter? Nothing would matter after tonight. So what if I found him attractive and him being nice had me in a state of absolute confusion?

"So where do you live?"

I told him in a mumble, and it turned out I didn't live far from his place. Only about a ten-minute walk separated our homes. Speaking of home, for each step we took, I got closer to it. I wondered if my parents were still fighting or if they were ignoring each other. I could never tell which was best; their moods were so volatile.

"Hey, want to come by my place for a bit?" he asked suddenly. "We could play video games or just hang out. Whatever."

I shot a startled look at him. "Uh, yeah. Sure." Why not? He was being nice to me. It would be good to spend my last hours with someone who actually *was* nice, instead of at home where the tension could always be cut with a knife.

Everything was quiet in his house when we got there. His bedroom was in the basement and it was actually quite a big room. He had a double bed, a desk with a closed laptop in the centre and books and pencils cluttered across it. He had a bloody *sofa* in his room and a flat-screen TV.

"Let's put those away." He grabbed the books from my arms and put them on his desk, then came back and took my rucksack from me as well. I felt suddenly naked, standing there without my rucksack and without my books, in the middle of his bedroom. "What do you have in here?" He lifted his arm once to feel the weight of my rucksack. "Bricks?" He deposited it next to his desk.

"Just my schoolbooks." I glanced around so I wouldn't have to look at him. Magazines were scattered over one of the nightstands, those popular ones with both interesting articles *and* naked girls. Not that naked girls were of any interest to me whatsoever.

"What do you want to play?" He was in front of the telly and I shuffled over to him. He held several PlayStation 3 games in his hands. I'd never heard of any of them. Games weren't my thing.

"You can play whatever you want," I said. "I'll just watch."

"What?" He turned to me. He was suddenly very, very close. "I'm not going to leave you to watch me play video games." He threw the games onto the sofa. "Come on, let's go find something to eat. I'm starving."

I trailed after him upstairs. My head spun. How exactly had I

found myself in his company, in his *home*? What did he want with me? Why was I worthy of being in his company?

He bent over as he leaned in to look in the freezer. My gaze instantly fell to his arse, which was clearly outlined as his jeans stretched tight. I quickly averted my eyes. I didn't want him to catch me ogling him. He was just being kind to me; he didn't need me lusting after him.

"Pizza okay?" He drew out a standard pepperoni pizza.

I nodded mutely and he turned the switches on the oven so it would heat up. He took the frozen pizza out of the cardboard, cut up the plastic, and put it on a baking sheet. The shirt he was wearing was loose-fitting, but when he stretched his arms, it revealed his muscled biceps. I knew Glenn liked to work out and play football, because he was constantly bragging about how much he'd bench-pressed or how many goals he'd scored. I wondered if Andreas used to train and play football with him.

Someone rounded the corner into the kitchen, scaring me halfway to death—I hadn't heard him. He was what I guessed was classified as emo, dressed all in black in skinny jeans and an unzipped hoodie with a tight vest underneath. His hair was black too, and styled forward so it fell against his face and into his eyes, which were framed by black kohl.

His eyes, a brilliant blue, kind of like my own, settled on me. "Well, hello." He grinned at me. "Where'd you come from?"

Oh my god. He's flirting with me.

Andreas turned around from the oven to glare at the newly-arrived bloke. "Bugger off, Ben."

Ben rolled his eyes, then turned to Andreas and cocked his head. "You should've said he was your boyfriend. I wouldn't have hit on him if I knew he was." Then he turned on his heel and exited the kitchen again.

Andreas' frown disappeared once he was out of the room, to be replaced by something bashful. "I'm sorry about him."

"Your brother?" I asked. They hadn't looked anything alike, but then he'd been wearing make-up whereas Andreas was all natural, so it was kind of hard to tell.

"Cousin," he replied. "We live with my uncle. He has for practically his whole life, while my sisters and I have for the last few years."

I frowned. I was curious as to why they were all living with their uncle, but I felt it would be too rude to ask.

We stayed in the kitchen until the pizza was done. Once he cut it up and put it on a plate, we headed back down to his bedroom. He turned the telly on and switched until he found a sitcom.

It was actually very nice to just sit there next to him on the sofa and eat pizza. I hadn't been around anyone like this in… I couldn't remember the last time I'd just hung out with someone. I was the outsider, the loner, and the freak with the scars. Always had been.

"A bunch of us are going out tonight," he said then, ruining the comfortable silence between us. "Would you like to come with?"

"Who's a bunch of us?" I already knew who one person would be and I couldn't say it sounded very appealing.

"Just the lads, a couple of girls. It's great fun. Always is." His head rested against the back of the sofa, and he tilted it to look at me. "I'd really like it if you came."

His eyes were so brown and deep and warm. His smile was friendly and disarming. I had no idea why he wanted to spend time with me, but the fact that he did… I didn't want to jinx it or in any way ruin it by asking questions. Saying yes to this meant I'd get to see him again, that I'd get to spend more time with him. I found that I desperately wanted that. So the only thing I could say was, "Okay."

Two

I opted out of the before party, as it was at Glenn's house. I just couldn't stomach that. So I told Andreas I'd meet them once they went out.

He sent me a text, since he'd insisted on us exchanging numbers, and now I was standing outside the club that allowed eighteen-year-olds inside.

Walking up to the bouncer, I gave him my debit card, which showed my date of birth. He waved me past him and I was in the club. It was dark and smoky and smelled of beer and alcohol. There were people everywhere, yelling at each other over the thumping music, laughing and joking with each other. This wasn't my kind of place at all.

I debated leaving, but then I was first in line to pay for the cover and I handed the girl behind the counter my money. I couldn't very well leave after paying to get into the club, so I started for the door that led into the first room. It had a bar and several places to sit, grouped together in the corners.

I looked around and spotted Andreas almost instantly. He sat on a sofa in one of the corners, talking animatedly to Glenn and another of his mates I'd seen him with before. All I knew was that Andreas was nice to me, Glenn was a complete tosser, and I didn't even know the third one. Still, I headed over there. What did I have to lose, anyway? If it went to shit, I could just do tomorrow night what I'd planned to be doing right now.

To my utter horror, Glenn saw me first. His gaze travelled down my body, sizing me up. I stopped in my tracks, not daring to move further. What would he say about me? He'd seen me in gym class; he'd seen my body. He knew what I did to myself.

He said something as he elbowed Andreas' side, and Andreas turned around. His face was set in a neutral expression.

I was afraid he'd been messing with me, but then his face split into a smile. He waved me over and I managed to get my feet moving again. Glenn looked like he couldn't believe what he was seeing, while their third mate simply eyed me in curiosity.

"Lads, this is Alex." Andreas scooted up closer to Glenn to give me space to sit. I sat down tentatively. "Alex, you already know Glenn. And this is Peter." I nodded to them both, but didn't dare look at them for too long.

"What the fuck's he doing here?" Glenn leaned in to ask Andreas, but I was sitting right there, so I could hear what he was yelling loud and clear.

"I invited him," Andreas replied, and then turned his back on him to focus on me. "I'm glad you came," he shouted in my ear. "Do you want something to drink? I'll buy you a beer, if you want?"

I nodded, then started to quietly panic as he left me there to head over to the bar. Left me there alone with Glenn, who couldn't stand me, and Peter, whom I didn't know.

A girl suddenly appeared out of nowhere, planting herself right in Peter's lap. They shared a kiss, and I turned my head away once I realised I'd stared too long. I'd never had that with anyone. I'd always wished I had someone special, but the blokes I had been involved with were only in it for the sex.

Andreas came back rather quickly. He handed me a glass of foaming beer. He'd bought one for himself too. "Thank you," I told him.

"Any time." He grinned at me as he sat back down, shielding me from Glenn. I was glad, because I could feel Glenn's eyes on me, judging me, when Andreas hadn't been there. "That's Sarah." Andreas leaned in close to me again and motioned to the girl in Peter's lap. "She's his girlfriend." Yeah, that was rather obvious.

I was surrounded by straight blokes. I was as gay as one could possibly get, and somehow I'd befriended, or rather been befriended by, one of the good-looking, straight lads in school. Who I thought was seriously hot. This was not good. I didn't even like beer, not really, but I was too young to get anything stronger from the bar, so it was either this or a Bacardi Breezer, and I didn't think that would go over well with the straight, beer-drinking lads I was with. Especially not Glenn, who would have yet another negative thing to say about me.

So, I drank my beer. Andreas had bought it for me, after all. When I was close to finishing the first one, he disappeared and came back with a new one. I took it, surprised, but thanked him and drank some more. It would have been rude not to.

Andreas tried to talk to me, but Glenn always drew him into conversation that required him to have to turn away from me. After I was done with the second beer, I put the glass down on the table and rose. "I'm going to the toilet," I told Andreas when he glanced up at me.

There was a small line, but I didn't mind. I'd rather take my time.

When I headed back, I couldn't see Andreas anywhere. Not Glenn either. Peter was there, snogging Sarah, but that was it. I looked around, uncertain, but couldn't find him. I headed out into the front room, but he wasn't there either. I sighed, undecided for a moment, then I walked out. If he wasn't there to speak to me, what was the

point in me even showing up?

"What the fuck, Andreas?" I heard yelling from around the corner of the building. I stopped in my tracks because that was Glenn's voice. And he was talking to Andreas. "Why'd you go and invite *him*? Do you know anything about him?"

"Stop being such an arse," Andreas replied, calmer. "I know he's a nice bloke. He's sad and alone and he just needs a mate. I happen to like his company."

"When have you even been *in* his company?" Glenn yelled. "He's just been here less than an hour."

"I spent hours after school with him, if you must know."

I leant against the brick wall. I didn't want to eavesdrop, but they were talking about me. I thought I had a right to know what they were saying about me.

"You have no fucking clue what you're getting yourself into," Glenn snapped. "You know he cuts himself, right? I've seen him. Big, ugly scars all over his arms and chest and legs. It's disgusting."

I wrapped my arms around my middle, hugging myself as my breath hitched.

"I don't care about that, Glenn." I could tell Andreas was annoyed now. His voice was exactly like it had been earlier when he'd told his cousin to bugger off. "I want to get to know him, and you can't stop me."

Glenn snorted. "Then do whatever the fuck you want. Go home and shag him, for all I care. I hear he likes getting *fucked*." Glenn came striding around the corner, right past me, and he threw me an angry glare as he caught sight of me.

I folded in on myself, wanting to make myself smaller. My eyes swam with tears again. Why did people have to be so cruel? Why did he have to go and tell Andreas, who'd been nothing but nice to me, my shameful secret? I didn't mind him knowing I was gay, though I did wonder *how* he knew. Glenn sharing my cutting, though, that was what really got me. He'd said it was disgusting, and it *was*. There was nothing nice about my body.

"Hey." Andreas was suddenly in front of me, and I glanced up without thinking. There was compassion in his eyes. "Did you hear that?"

I nodded, unable to speak. A big, great lump had stuck in my throat, cutting off my voice.

"Let's get out of there." He reached out to grab my arms, pulling them apart. Once I'd let them fall to my sides, he took one of my hands in his and tugged me with him. I was so surprised by the movement that I willingly followed. "He had no right to say that about you." He looked at me, face set in a serious expression.

"It was the truth," I whispered.

"Doesn't matter. He still shouldn't have said what he did." Andreas squeezed my hand, then as we headed up the street, he readjusted his grip so he could tangle his fingers with mine. "He was being an arse. He can be quite a tosser sometimes, but I swear he can be nice, too."

I smiled slightly at that. "I'll have to take your word on that, because I've never seen evidence of it."

"I'm sorry," he said, then, with a low voice, "I asked you out because I thought it would be fun. Ended up being the opposite, didn't it? It was a disaster."

"I wouldn't say disaster. But it wasn't fun either—no." I kept my head bowed as we walked, staring down at his fingers tangled with mine. *Why's he holding my hand?* I wasn't bothered by the fact that he held it, because the contact felt good. Still, there was the reason *why* he held it. *Why had he even asked me out?* I wanted to ask as much, but my heart beat wildly just at the thought. I didn't dare.

"Glenn was right about the last thing he said, too, right?" Andreas' thumb rubbed over my knuckles.

"Huh?" The last thing he'd said? What had that been? All that rang in my ear was Glenn's voice, saying how disgusting I looked.

"About you? Being gay?" His gaze searched mine.

"Oh. Yeah." I hoped hearing confirmation on that wouldn't disturb him. That he wouldn't let go of my hand.

He did let go of my hand, and I felt a soul-shattering loneliness all of a sudden, but then his arm slid across my shoulders and drew me in close to him. "Good," was all he said.

My arms were stiff at my side and my head spun again. "A-Are you?" I squeaked out, afraid to ask, but having to know the answer. The fact that his arm was over my shoulders had to mean that the answer was yes, though, because why else would he want me so close?

"Gay for you." He turned a big grin my way. "Nah, not gay, no. I'm bi. I like girls. But I like you, too."

I stared up at him through my fringe, eyes wide. "You realise that *everything* Glenn said is true? About the cuts and the scars. And how disgusting it all looks."

His face was open and friendly and completely sincere. "And I meant what I said. That I don't care about that." His hand rubbed soothingly at the back of my neck.

Now my heart beat wildly for an entirely different reason. He wasn't straight, not completely, and he wanted *me*. He'd even been told about what I did to myself, and he *still* wanted me.

What were the odds?

It might just be for the sex, but I'd take what I could. I could do what I'd planned later, when he was tired of me. It wasn't like I absolutely *had* to do it tonight.

Especially not with a hot bloke at my side.

Three

He led me into his bedroom in the basement, much the same way as he had earlier that day. But the moment I closed the door behind me, he was there, pushing me into the wood as he kissed me.

He was all hard and warm and male, pressing up against me, and his lips were soft on mine. He was a good kisser; he knew exactly what to do with his tongue to turn me on the most.

He didn't waste any time either, his hands were already inching my shirt up my chest. The shirt I'd spend ages obsessing over before I went out, if it looked nice enough or not. I lifted my arms so he could take it off me. I had a tight vest under and he pulled that off as well.

I would've felt self-conscious with my chest and stomach on display like that, but he was still pressed up against me, still kissing me, so it wasn't like he could see it. His hands ran over my chest, tweaking my nipples, but he never once faltered when he encountered a scar.

I wanted to touch him too, so I slipped my hands underneath his thin jumper. He wasn't wearing anything under it, so I instantly encountered warm skin. His skin was smooth. I let my hands travel up his sides, then around to his chest. There was a smattering of hair there, and his nipples were already pebbled. I rolled them between my thumb and index finger, which earned a low groan from him.

Letting my hands travel down again, I encountered his treasure trail. I unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down his thighs. He was wearing tight boxers, and as I let my hand travel down the front of them, I could feel his cock through the fabric. It was already hard, lying to one side, just waiting to be let loose.

I pushed his boxers down and it bobbed free, slapping against his lower stomach.

After wrapping my hand around it, I was surprised at the length and thickness. Jesus, he was *big*. I stroked him slowly, contemplating my next move. I wanted him to fuck me, but I also wanted to feel his cock on my tongue. Why not do both?

I pulled away from his kiss. His eyes opened, staring at me. I stared back for a moment, then slowly fell to my knees. His cock seemed even bigger now that I faced it. I'd make it work, though. I was good at two things in my life: studying and sex.

I glanced up at him one last time and found him watching me in return. That made me a bit self-conscious, but I bent forward to take his head into my mouth. I sucked on the foreskin, then pulled away so I could stroke down, revealing the plump head. I sucked that

into my mouth next, letting my tongue work around the sensitive underside of it.

"Fuck," he groaned above me, and one of his hands tangled in my hair. He didn't pull on my hair like some did. I was grateful for that, and that he didn't try to force me further down on his cock. I didn't have trouble deep-throating most blokes, but he was too big for that. Trying it would most likely unhinge my jaw.

I sucked on what I could and stroked the rest. Judging by the groans escaping him, he seemed to enjoy it. I closed my eyes and lost myself in sucking him, in giving him as much pleasure as possible. I loved sucking cock, almost as much as I loved getting fucked by one. Sex was the one pleasure in my life, and I hadn't even had that for a while now—not since the middle of summer, when the bloke I'd been having sex with moved away to go to university.

His fingers slid against my scalp, massaging me gently. My hair pulled a bit every time it tangled around his fingers, but it only served to make me hotter.

I didn't want him to come while I sucked him, so I pulled back eventually. I looked up at him. His eyes were closed, he braced one forearm against the door and his forehead was pressed against it. The other hand was still in my hair.

"Lube," I said, licking my lips. "I hope you've got lube."

His eyes opened. I could clearly see the desire swirling in them. "Yeah. Of course." He turned to walk over to his nightstand, and while he had his back to me, I quickly shucked my clothes and got on the bed.

I sat there with my legs tucked under me, watching as he searching through his drawer. He eventually found the tube among all the clutter, then turned to face me. I was extremely aware of the fact that my entire front was on display, with all that entailed, but he didn't comment. His eyes fell to my lap instead, where my cock jutted out, hard and ready.

"Want the same treatment from me first?" He nodded towards my cock.

I shook my head. "No, just—Let's just get to it." I knew some had trouble coming from anal penetration, but I'd never had that problem. Anal penetration was pleasurable for me, as long as I was prepared properly beforehand, and I could come from that alone. I didn't need a blowjob to get things going.

He nodded and got out of his own clothes. He was still fully clothed, after all, with only his cock standing at proud attention and free of it all.

His body was even more magnificent naked than it was when he was dressed. Wide shoulders, muscular arms and chest, a flat

stomach with hint of a six-pack, strong thighs and legs. His body hair was darker than the blond hair on his head. He looked amazing and I couldn't believe he'd chosen me.

He got behind me and splayed a hand between my shoulder blades, pushing me down on my stomach. I went willingly. I preferred being on my stomach, and not just because of my scarred front. He stroked his hand down my back, over my arse, then he grabbed both my cheeks and parted them. I couldn't kill the startled moan that escaped me as his tongue ran over my hole.

I'd never had anyone rim me before. It was a completely new sensation—and boy, what a sensation it was! Having a tongue work me open was a thousand times better than fingers. It was warm, naturally slick with saliva, and though it couldn't breach me quite as deep as fingers, it worked so well on relaxing me.

I buried my face in his pillow. It smelled like him, strongly of soap, shampoo, and most of all, his cologne. It was an addictive smell. I slid my arms under the pillow as well, gripping the bed sheet as he continued to lick me. I wasn't very loud during sex, because even though I loved having it, I felt too embarrassed to make the kind of sounds blokes always made in porn films. Or the sounds the blokes fucking me made, for that matter.

Lubed fingers joined his tongue eventually, loosening me enough to take his big cock. All the while, I kept my face buried in his pillow. My eyes were closed as I enjoyed what he did to my body. I was relaxed, I was loose, and I was ready to take this further.

He must've had the same thought, because he drew back. I missed his fingers and tongue, but in the next second, he was back. One arm planted on the bed next to my chest, while the other put his cock into place against my hole. I could feel the plump head press against me and my breath hitched in anticipation.

He shoved his hips forward and his wide head breached me. I gasped slightly, burying my face further into his pillow. His other arm came down on my other side, propping him up above me while he slowly sank into me. The front of his thighs were resting against the back of mine, pushing my thighs even further apart. He filled me up like I'd never been filled up before. It didn't hurt, though, because I was still relaxed and he'd used a good amount of lube that made it that much easier for him to slide inside.

He stopped when he was buried balls-deep. I could feel his heavy balls against my skin. "Are you okay?" He bent down to ask it in a low voice against my ear. "I know I'm big and that it's hard to take."

"I'm fine," I whispered, my voice unsteady. "You can move."

He nuzzled my hair, then pushed himself back up and started

to pull out of me. It was as big going back out. He kept the head inside, and then he pushed back in, a bit quicker this time around. My body rocked against the bed as he buried himself again. My cock rubbed against the sheets teasingly.

He started to thrust for real now and I couldn't stop the occasional moan escaping, because dammit, he was *so* big and he rubbed up against my prostate.

When I thought I was going to come any second from his cock deep in me and my own cock being rubbed against the sheets, he suddenly grabbed a hold of my hips and lifted me up. I got my knees under me, but kept my upper body down as he continued to ram into me.

My cock bobbed in time with his thrusts, and I knew I wouldn't even have to touch it now to come. His movements made sure his cock rubbed my prostate on *every* stroke, and I struggled to hold onto my control.

I usually lasted a lot longer than this, but my orgasm was already building. I came with a strangled moan, which I muffled in the pillow. My cock spurted several quick squirts onto the sheets. He fucked me through my entire orgasm and continued to do so once I was spent.

I was even more sensitive now, but his groans were increasing, and his thrusts where becoming frantic. I could tell the exact moment he came, because his hips stuttered to a halt for a couple of seconds, buried deep in me, before he started bucking again. He kept fucking me through *his* entire orgasm too. He groaned again as he pulled all the way out of me.

I collapsed down on the bed, my thighs quivering. Now that he wasn't behind me anymore, the air in the room felt chilly. Especially against my hole, which was loose and well-fucked. I could feel something drip out of me, down my balls, and onto the sheets. *He didn't use a condom.*

He got off the bed, there was a click, then he fell down beside me, disturbing the mattress.

When I opened my eyes, I saw nothing. He'd turned off the lights. I started to push myself up.

"Where are you going?" His head turned on the other pillow.

"Home," I said uncertainly, almost like a question.

"Don't be mental," he said, putting a hand on my back and pushing me back down on the bed. "Go to sleep, Alex."

He wants me to spend the night? What on earth for? Maybe he wanted more sex during the night, or in the morning. I wasn't going to argue. I turned on my side, with my back to him, and curled up. His semen still trickled down my skin, but there was a strange comfort in

that.

He moved around behind me and I wondered what he was doing. It became apparent a moment later as he scooted up behind me and put a duvet over me. He didn't move away after; instead, he lay down with his chest against my back. He wrapped one strong arm around my waist as he put his head against my neck, kissing me softly where my neck met my shoulder.

I suddenly felt like crying.

Four

I woke to light shining in my face and a long, thick cock poking into my lower back. I blinked myself into awareness as the previous day's events slammed back into my consciousness.

I was with Andreas, in his bed, after having had amazing sex with him. Now, it seemed like his cock at least was up for another round.

So was mine. It was lying against my stomach, hard as well.

I wiggled a bit, which made him groan. His hand, still wrapped around my waist, slid down to feel the state of my cock. He ran his fingers over the head, stroked it teasingly. "Are you awake?" He kissed my shoulder softly, his stubble scraping my skin slightly.

"Yeah." My eyes fell closed as he continued stroking me. *God, that feels good.*

His bucked his hips against me, so his cock slid against my bum and lower back. I wiggled a bit more, so it was pressed between my cheeks, against my hole.

"Are you up for that again so soon?" he asked me, kissing my shoulder again. That stubble of his raking against my skin would drive me mental if he continued. "Aren't you sore?"

"It's okay," I whispered. I wanted him inside me again. I wanted to feel him, I wanted to be as close to him as I could possibly get.

He let go of my cock, which was a downer, and leaned away. He was quickly back, now with lube, which he smeared over my hole before slipping two fingers into me at the same time.

I expected him to slide into me from the position we were in, but to my horror, he pushed me onto my back.

"What are you doing?" I moved my arms up to cover my chest. Not that it did any good; my arms were even worse than my chest.

"I want to see you this time." He looked into my eyes as he pushed my thighs apart and laid down in-between them. He hooked his arms under my knees, then pushed my feet up on his shoulder. *Oh shit.* Was I limber enough for this? He bent forward—bending me almost in half—positioned his cock, then thrust inside.

My breath hitched, like it tended to do when I was breached for the first time. Turned out, I was limber enough for what he had in mind, because while my thighs strained, they didn't really hurt. His face was close to mine in this position, and at first he'd kept his head bent to watch himself thrust into me, but now he turned his head to kiss me.

I was surprised, but I kissed him back. I wasn't used to kissing

during sex—it was difficult to accomplish when I was on my stomach. Which I almost always was since it was my favourite position.

This position wasn't so bad, because he kept me bent over, which meant he was as well, so it wasn't like my scars were on display for him to ogle. In fact, he kept on kissing me, so he couldn't see any of my body at all.

One of his hands wrapped around my cock, stroking me in time with his thrusts. This too was also unusual for me. I clung to his neck and kissed him with all I had as I was being pleasured by both his cock and his hand.

He went slower than he had been the night before, but that didn't make it any less intense. It didn't take me long to come at all, and this time I shot all over my own chest, as I was bent up like I was.

Andreas once again lasted longer than me, but this time, he didn't fuck me through his orgasm. Instead he pulled out, sat up, and started stroking himself off over me.

I was still dazed from my orgasm, so I was a lot more relaxed than I would've normally been if anyone suddenly had such a good view of my front.

He threw his head back as he came, exposing his throat and the tendons that strained there as he orgasmed. He shot his semen all over my stomach. When he was dry, he ran his hands up my legs, which were still on his shoulders, and slowly lowered them to either side of him. "Take a shower with me."

"Wha—No, that's okay. I'll just go home and shower there." I was full of spunk, though, so getting dressed wasn't exactly something I looked forward to.

"Now, that would be mental, wouldn't it? I have a fully-functioning shower. Come on." He took my arm and pulled me up into a sitting position. I didn't bother to argue anymore; he'd made up his mind, so I padded after him out the door and over the hall into the bathroom.

The shower was big. It was in one corner of the room, and it had two sliding doors made out of glass. He opened them and wasted no time turning the shower on and adjusting the temperature. I stood there awkwardly, arms crossed in front of my chest, until he turned his head and nodded for me to join him. He made space for me, then turned to slide the doors closed.

I stood with my back to him, unsure and uncomfortable.

"You shouldn't be so ashamed of how you look." I could feel him come up behind me. His hands slid up over my shoulders, then down my chest. I shuddered. "I mean it when I say I don't care. I can't say I understand it, but you must have your reasons. But I think you're fucking gorgeous, and a few scars aren't going to take away from

that."

It was more than a few scars, but I refrained from saying it. He had already seen me; he knew exactly how many there were. I turned around half-way to face him.

A grin spread on his face and then he pushed me back into the spray, up against the wall, as he kissed me hard. "Mmm, you're so fucking gorgeous. I can't stop touching you."

He really couldn't. I didn't mind at all.

He pushed my wet hair out of my face and kissed me one last time, then bent away to grab a bottle of shampoo. I wiped the water from my eyes—not that it would help much as I was directly under the stream. I watched him as he rubbed shampoo in his hair and stepped away so he could wash it off.

He grinned at me as he moved under the stream. Streams of soap ran down his tanned skin and I couldn't keep my eyes off of him. He'd said I was gorgeous, but it was the opposite. *He* was the one who was gorgeous. I followed one foamy stream as it trickled down his treasure trail, into his pubes, and over his cock. It was big when it was flaccid, too.

"Aren't you going to wash up?" He laughed as he took a step toward me. He squeezed more shampoo into hands and put them in my hair, rubbing until it foamed.

Some of it ran into my eyes, stinging a bit, and I laughed as I reached up to wipe it away.

His hands stopped their movement, and I glanced up at him. He was staring down at me with a look I couldn't decipher. "You should laugh more often."

I felt myself blush at that. I never laughed, because what did I really have to laugh about? I went to rinse the shampoo off so I wouldn't have to meet his eyes again. I was sure he could've read me like an open book if I'd stayed there in front of him.

He didn't push the subject. Instead, he soaped himself up while I was careful to get all of the shampoo out of my hair. We switched places and I rubbed down my front, my crotch, and my arse with soap to get rid of all traces of semen and lube.

We switched places once again, but as the water beat down on me to get rid of all the soap, he pressed up against my back again, kissing my shoulder. I tilted my head to rest against his temple, and he wrapped his arms around me to hug me close.

We finished our shower, dried up, and wrapped towels around our waists before heading back into his bedroom.

"Do you have anywhere to be today?" He threw his towel on the bed without a second thought, not bashful in the slightest. I guess I shouldn't really have been either, considering what we'd done

together, but I still was.

"No." I wasn't working this weekend, which was why I'd chosen this weekend to kill myself. It had turned out quite different, though, and I couldn't really complain.

"Want to spend the day together?" He took a pair of clean boxers from his chest of drawers and pulled them on.

I hadn't expected that. I'd thought we would have sex and go our separate ways. That was all I'd had before. That he still wanted to spend time with me baffled me. "Oh, um, sure." I pulled on my own underwear before getting rid of the towel.

He grinned and threw a pair of joggers at me. I caught them, surprised. "Lots better to lounge around in than jeans, don't you think?"

He threw one of his thin, long-sleeved jumpers at me too, while he himself donned a tight vest that showed off his upper body to perfection. His joggers were loose on him, but they clung to his crotch, so his cock was outlined through them. I cleared my throat and quickly pulled on the ones meant for me. They were baggy, but they sat comfortably over my hips. He was right that they were a lot more comfortable.

We headed upstairs to eat breakfast. I found myself in the middle of his entire family. No one questioned my presence there either, besides introducing themselves. His uncle, Thomas, was sitting at the head of the table reading the paper. His sisters, Christina and Maria, were making an omelette, and his cousin Ben, whom I had already met, kind of, was sitting at the table with a notebook in front of him and a pen between his teeth—which he nobbled on thoughtfully.

They were all so comfortable around each other, navigating around each other with ease. It was the way a family should be. Like mine had never been. This was what I wanted, what I missed, what I'd never had. It was relaxing. They didn't walk around on tip-toe, afraid that one wrong word or movement would set of another fight or earn a slap across the face.

They were a proper family. And by seeing them, I was reminded just how dysfunctional my own was.

Five

"I'll see you Monday morning," Andreas had said when he'd kissed me goodbye Sunday afternoon.

So here I was, still alive, back at school, carrying all my books back with me. I deposited them all in my locker, aside from the one I'd need for the first class, and pulled the padlock up from my pocket to lock it. I was worried about the first class, and about one person's comments in particular.

I needn't have worried—Glenn didn't so much as look at me when I entered the classroom. He was busy joking with several of the other footballers, and I was ignored like I so very often was. I sat down in the corner, and as usual, I got two desks all for myself.

The day dragged by. When lunch break arrived, I wasn't sure what to do with myself as I headed to my locker to get rid of my books. No one else was around, so I bumped my forehead against the cold metal of the locker as I wondered what to do. I hadn't planned to be here today—or any other day to come, so coming back… it left me feeling a little lost. I had no clue what to do now. I could go back to the classroom and eat my lunch alone, like I usually did.

But Andreas had said we'd see each other, and I really did want to see him—

A hand slid teasingly up my back and I shuddered. It could only be one person, though, because no one else would touch me like that.

I turned around, feeling my lips split up into a small smile at the sight of him. "Hey."

"Hey." He smiled at me. "Want to come have lunch with me?"

I nodded and he led me outside. Nervousness racked up in me again when I saw his mates from Friday at one table. The table we were heading towards. Glenn's smile instantly fell when he spotted me and he turned away with a disgusted sigh.

I lowered my head.

Peter and Sarah were more cordial, smiling at me in greeting, but my mood was already ruined by Glenn's dismissal, and his words from Friday night still rang in my head.

Andreas ignored him to begin with, trying to talk to both me and the others, but I could tell his mood slowly got worse as Glenn continued to ignore me.

"Glenn, mate. Come here for a bit." He stood up and motioned sharply to Glenn, who rolled his eyes, but followed him a ways off. I stared after them, and I could see Andreas say something sharply to Glenn and Glenn arguing back.

“He really is a nice bloke,” Sarah spoke up from where she sat next to Peter. “Deep down.” She glanced at them, too.

I didn’t say anything, just let my gaze wander back to them again. They were arguing now. They were supposed to be best mates, and just because Andreas had befriended me, Glenn was flying off the handle. I didn’t want to come between them. I wasn’t worth that kind of trouble.

“I have to go.” I got up from the table and hurried off without even waiting for an answer. I walked around the building to the back of the school where there was hardly anyone around. I sat down on the stairs leading up to a pair of doors that were always locked and bent in on myself.

I pulled up one of my sleeves with a shaking hand and started scratching. A few of the more recent cuts that hadn’t turned into scars started bleeding again, but I couldn’t stop scratching at them.

I fought tears and the pain that the scratching caused helped keep them at bay. I longed for a razor, but all of them were back home, in my nightstand.

Andreas liked me just for me. Why couldn’t Glenn just accept that? Why did he have to have issues—why did he have to argue with Andreas because of me? Glenn was right, of course, but Andreas didn’t seem to care, so why should Glenn? It wasn’t like I was going to steal him away or anything. I just wanted a bit of his time, whenever he had it. I wasn’t picky or demanding. I’d take the fucking crumbs, as long as I could have them. When he tired of me, then there was nothing left. Only one thing to do, then.

“Hey, Alex.” Someone sat down next to me, causing me to jump nearly a foot in the air, as I hadn’t heard anyone approach. For a moment, I was sure it was Andreas, because who else would seek me out? But when I looked up, I saw all black. It was Andreas’ emo cousin, Ben.

I hurriedly pulled my sleeve down, hiding my bleeding arm from view, but I could tell from where his eyes were directed that he’d already seen it. “Glenn told me about that.” He nodded his chin towards my arm.

“He bitches about me to other people, too?” I asked, my voice shaking. I was about to lose complete control over myself. Why did he talk about me behind my back? Being against me and Andreas being friends was one thing, but to someone else?

“I met him at an after-party Friday night. He was really drunk and bitching about Andreas. He mentioned you a couple of times.” Ben leaned back and regarded me with blue eyes. “Want to know a secret?”

I wrapped my arms up against my chest and bent forward

towards my knees. I didn't answer him, because how could I ever benefit from someone's secrets?

"You can't tell anyone. Not even Andreas," Ben demanded of me and I nodded slightly. "Thing with Glenn is that he's a complete tosser. But he grew up like that, so it's not like he can help it. Big secret is, he's not as straight as he'd want people to think. I've shagged him, so I know."

I jerked my head around to stare at him. "Glenn's gay?"

"I wouldn't say gay." Ben shrugged as he looked skywards. "Bisexual. But he loved the ever-fucking-life out of our encounter, I can tell you that. And I think that his jealousy is because he wants Andreas for himself. He wants to bang him and he can't take that you got there first."

My eyes widened. I wasn't sure if Andreas was out to his family or not, but I didn't want to take that chance. "I haven't—I mean—we're not—"

Ben only smiled. "Andreas and I share the basement. We share walls. And the walls down there aren't really that thick." He turned his head back down to grin at me. "Trust me, I know you've got where Glenn hasn't ever had a shot at being."

I was mortified. He'd heard us? How could that even be possible? I was usually so quiet during sex and I hadn't thought Andreas' groans had been that loud.

"Don't have a bloody aneurysm, love." He bent forward and cocked his head so his hair fell out of his eyes. "I've known for a while that Andreas isn't exactly straight. We do share the basement, and he's even told me. I am one hundred percent gay, and everybody knows that. Sometimes Andreas and I chat about blokes, especially if we watch a film together, because you can't help ogling the male main character, right? That's like one of the points of even watching a film. But yeah, I know, he knows I know. It's all good."

I wasn't sure what to say to that, but I guessed it was good that he knew. "Your family doesn't mind that you're gay?" I hadn't even told my parents. First off, they weren't receptive to anything but their dysfunctional and abusive relationship, and second of all, we'd never had the kind of relationship where we could chat about our feelings.

He laughed. "My family's pretty open-minded. First of all, a lot of shit has gone down in our family, so we can't really judge anybody. Second of all, my uncle's fucking awesome. I mean, Christina's dating our cousin and no one's batting an eye at it. I'm gay, I like to party, and have sex. That's just general knowledge. Also, my best mate is the most flaming queer you'll ever meet, but we all love him." He suddenly shrugged out of his big hoodie, revealing arms covered from shoulder to wrist in tattoos. "I used to cut myself. I was in a difficult

place, so I wholeheartedly understand. Stuff must be difficult for you."

He'd what? I gripped tighter to my forearms as I watched the black-and-grey tattoos. I couldn't make out all of the design, but there was an angel on his upper arm: an angel with black wings. There were rose petals at intervals down his arms, all of them tattooed in a dark red, which contrasted with the rest of the piece.

"Feel my arm." He held it out to me and I slowly unwound myself to do as he demanded. I expected to feel smooth skin where the tattoos had healed into his skin, but I didn't. It was bumpy, full of scars. And when I was leaned in closer, I could see them too. "Yeah. They show, of course they do, but they're difficult to spot at a distance, at least. My tattoo artist is the absolute best. But as you can feel, I've been exactly where you are. I know it's not easy, that life feels like shit, but it gets better."

I couldn't help the derisive snort that left me at that. "Yeah, right."

"Hasn't it already?" His gaze was steady on me. "With Andreas? Personally, I think he fancies you. And I think you fancy him too, or else this shit with Glenn wouldn't bother you."

Fancy? I couldn't quite see it. Why would he *fancy* me? Sure, the sex was good and all, but surely that was it?

"Do you have personal experience with that?" I asked dryly.

"Actually, I can sympathise with Glenn. Unrequited love sucks." He was smiling as he said it, so I wasn't sure if I should take him seriously or not.

"It's not exactly love," I said instead. "We don't know each other. We only met on Friday."

"Every relationship starts with a meeting. More than most start with sex. And isn't it the whole point of a relationship, though? To get to know each other, I mean."

I suppose he had a point.

The bell rang.

Ben stood up, stretched, then shrugged into his hoodie again. "Duty calls." He didn't sound at all excited about going back in.

"Yeah," I muttered, pushing myself to my feet too. Whereas he didn't seem to like the thought of going back in much at all, I didn't mind. Yes, I was ignored in there, but at least the hours went by. I didn't have to be at home, and I was actually good at studying. I got a six on every test we had, so my grades were definitely not one of my many problems. "Ben." He'd begun to walk away from me, but he turned back now. I took a deep breath. "Thank you." For sitting with me, for talking to me, for showing me his arms.

He smiled. "Any time, Alex."

Six

I waited out front after school was over for the day. I wasn't sure if Andreas was done or not, but I took the chance on him not finishing before me. I watched every person who exited either the front door or the smaller one up to the left that lead directly out from the second floor classrooms.

I was so anxious scanning for blond hair, I didn't notice the petite redhead coming up to me.

"Hello, Alex," Sarah said, startling me.

"Uh, hi." I shifted uncomfortably.

"Are you waiting for Andreas?" she asked me kindly, tilting her head slightly.

"Yeah." I scanned the doors again.

"He's already done for the day. I think he headed home." She hoisted her bag further up on her shoulder. "I'm doing media, so I'm not in their class, but as Peter's my boyfriend, I kind of know their class schedule by heart."

"Oh." I bent my head, disappointed.

"You could always head over to him," she suggested lightly.

"I don't know…" Glenn had already left. What if he'd gone home with Andreas? I didn't want to get between them again.

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind. He was upset at lunch when he came back to the table and you weren't there."

I glanced up at her. *Does she know?* I couldn't read her, not with that generic look on her face. If she did know, or suspect, it didn't seem to bother her. Not like it did Glenn.

"Thank you." I smiled briefly at her, then hoisted my rucksack up over one shoulder and walked away from the school. Should I stop by his house, see if he was home? Or should I just wait until school tomorrow? I wouldn't want to intrude on him, no matter what Sarah said.

I went home.

Loud voices greeted me, coming from the direction of the living room. I sighed and hurried up the stairs to my room. I definitely didn't want to come between my parents when they were arguing. Or fighting. Or both. I didn't want to come between them when they weren't arguing, either; I preferred to stay far out of their way. Getting close to them never served anyone any good.

I dropped my rucksack to the floor, then fell down on the bed. I rolled over onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. The voices beneath me got higher, shriller, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. Why couldn't they just get a divorce? They'd never been

happy together, at least not as far back as I could remember. Why did they stick together when all they did was argue and, more often than not, end up in fistfights?

I didn't know if they had some stupid notion of staying together for their kids, but Camilla and Leo, my siblings, were long gone. I was the only one left, and it wasn't like they gave a shit about me anyway.

I still had a scar on my chest where my mum had thrown a damn plate at me last year in one of her fits. She got so angry sometimes that she started throwing things, and that time last year, I'd got in the way. I didn't think she'd meant to hit me, but none of them had even bothered to stop fighting long enough to make sure I was okay.

My mobile buzzed in my pocket and I fished it out in curiosity. Who would text me? Maybe it was my boss, needing me to take a shift at the supermarket. I wouldn't mind taking an extra shift as long as it meant I'd get away from here.

It wasn't my boss.

My heart skipped a beat as I stared at the name.

Andreas: Want 2 go 2 the cinema with me? My treat!

My heart beat wilder. Going to the cinema with him… that was a *date*. Especially if he paid. Maybe this was more than sex after all? I sent back a quick affirmative. I had no idea what films they were showing, but I didn't care. If I got to spend more time with him, I could sit there watching a children's cartoon.

Andreas: Meet me at the playground at the end of your street in 15?

I sent another affirmative, then got moving. I had to find something else to wear. I couldn't wear what I had to school, but I couldn't wear something really nice, either, because it was just the cinema. I settled on another pair of jeans darker than the ones I currently wore. Then I put on a thin, plain shirt with a tee over it. The long-sleeved shirt would hide my arms, but it wouldn't be too stifling with it.

I was at the playground exactly eleven minutes after he'd sent me the text. He wasn't there yet, but then I was the one who was early. I sat down on a swing to wait for him, as there were no kids around.

He came around the bend in the road not long after I'd sat down, and I stood up to greet him nervously.

"Hey." He smiled at me.

I wiped off my palms, suddenly all clammy, on the front of my jeans. "Hey."

We headed out of the playground and towards the town centre.

"Where did you go today? I came back to the table and you were gone." He wasn't looking at me, he wasn't even accusing in his tone, just curious, but I still folded a bit in on myself.

"You were arguing with your best mate over me. I didn't—I didn't want that." Better to just tell the truth. *Why not?* It wasn't like I saw a reason to lie. Or even had a handy lie lying around.

"Glenn's an arse. We argue all time because he can't filter himself, or because he's rude to people. We always make up, though. We parted as friends. There's no bad blood between us. He just needs to get over himself and I told him so."

I nodded, but I was still worried. Glenn's problem was with me in particular. Ben's theory might be right; it even made sense now that I thought about it properly. There was nothing I could do about it, however. Andreas seemed to want to spend time with me, and I couldn't push his attentions towards Glenn. I didn't even want to. I wanted Andreas for myself. I didn't think that made me selfish, as Andreas himself kept pushing to spend time with me.

"Hey." He bumped his shoulder with mine. "Really. There's no bad blood between me and Glenn. He's just a stuck-up arse at times, but he can be nice. I know you don't believe it, because he seems to have singled you out for some silly reason."

"He said it himself. Because of my scars and the fact that I'm gay." It was easy to admit to the scars when I was referring to Glenn's own words about me.

"Don't take it to heart. Leave him to stew. He'll get over it eventually."

I wasn't so sure about that, but what could I say? Glenn had disliked me before Friday, when Andreas had befriended me. He'd been one of the most vocal with the slurs all of last year.

"I'm not going to let him bully me into not seeing you again." He bumped my shoulder again. "I'm my own person. I can make my own decisions. And I want to get to know you, Alex."

I swallowed the lump that had suddenly stuck in my throat. No one had ever wanted to get to know me. Was it a sign from somewhere that he'd come along on Friday, being all nice and interested, the exact day I'd planned to end it all?

The film didn't hold my attention. It held zero interest to me. And it was all Andreas' fault, because his hand had reached over to me the moment the lights switched off, and his fingers played softly with mine.

I could see our hands, tangled together, in the light from the big screen at the front of the room. I couldn't take my eyes off of

them. My skin was pale in comparison to his, but then he was a footballer and had probably been out in the sun training all summer.

I hardly ever showed my skin—for obvious reasons.

He bent over, his lips next to my ear. I shuddered. “I like you, Alex. I hope you don’t mind.”

Mind? How could I possibly mind this? He was a wet dream! He was handsome, he was fit, he was good in bed, he was kind… and he was interested in me.

“I don’t,” I whispered back. “Not at all.”

“Good.” He bent his head so his lips travelled down to the thin, soft skin under my earlobe. I tilted my head to the side as I strangled the moan that tried to escape me. We were sitting in the last row, and the few other people in the cinema were sitting further down.

I’d never done this before. Never been to the cinema with anyone. Never been with anyone who liked me, who desired me for more than just a quick fuck. I didn’t know why he did, but being with him felt good. I was going to take what I could get.

His other hand, the one that wasn’t holding my hand, came down on my thigh. It squeezed at first, then moved up.

I sat stiffly, part of me afraid that someone would see what we were doing, the other part more turned on than anything else. He sucked on my neck. My eyes slipped shut of their own accord. We wouldn’t have had to go to the cinema, pay for a ticket, for this. We could’ve just gone back to his room. I wouldn’t have said no. Not to sex, not to *him*. It was too good to pass over. I liked having sex with him.

His hand squeezed my cock, kneading me through my jeans.

“Oh!” I couldn’t stop the soft gasp from escaping.

Andreas drew back. When I turned my head and opened my eyes, I could see he was grinning. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I really wanted to see this film. But you’re just too tempting.”

My heart jumped. Literally jumped into my throat.

“We can continue this later, right?”

I nodded jerkily, expecting him to draw away from me completely. But he didn’t. He still held my hand in his and he tangled our fingers together properly. I squeezed softly, and he returned it.

Wow, okay. This was… so different from anything I’d ever experienced. A good kind of different, though. A *very* good kind.

I wasn’t able to concentrate on the film at all. I didn’t even know what it was about. When the credits started rolling and we got up to leave, all I’d been doing for the last hour and a half had been staring at him and our hands. He’d held my hand all through it.

“Wanna go by BK? Get some food?”

I nodded quickly. Anything as long as I could stay with him a

bit longer.

Burger King was only a two-minute walk from the cinema. We ordered our food at the till—he a burger and I a chicken baguette, both with chips—then sat down in a booth.

"Don't you like burgers?" he asked me.

"I do, just… not the burgers here. No offence."

"None taken." I leaned back as he continued to watch me. "Everyone's got different tastes."

"Obviously." It came out without thought.

"What do you mean?"

I blushed. "Me. Umm, like, you seem to like me for some reason, so… different tastes."

He smiled and leaned forward again. He took both my hands in his and squeezed. His hands were bigger than mine, and they were dry and warm and soft. My own palms were sweating. I was nervous. He made me nervous.

Our food was called up.

"I'll get it." He smiled and got up before I could protest.

I looked after his back until he disappeared around the corner, then turned my head back around just as the front door opened. I swear I stopped breathing. Peter came in, and behind him was Glenn. Glenn saw me instantly and his eyes narrowed.

I dropped my eyes to the table. They continued past the table. The hair in the back of my neck rose, so I was pretty sure Glenn still glared. I wasn't sure Peter had even seen me.

"Hey, mate!" I heard him greet Andreas. Glenn mumbled something too, but it was too low for me to hear.

"Hey." I could hear the smile in Andreas' voice. "I'll catch up with you later, lads. Don't want the food to get cold."

"See you!" That was Peter. I couldn't hear Glenn say anything.

Andreas sat two trays down on the table. I finally lifted my head so I could dig into my food. I was hungry. I hadn't eaten since lunch at school.

He unwrapped his own burger across from me.

"Don't you want to sit with your friends?" I glanced up at him, uncertain.

"Nope." He popped the 'p'. "I'd rather sit here with you."

That simple sentence managed to warm my whole body. I felt all tingly. A small smile broke through on my lips.

"You're beautiful when you smile." He stared at me, then shook his head once he realised it. "I mean, I think you are in general, but when you smile… you light up."

I could feel my cheeks flushing.

He chuckled. "I know it's only been a few days, but I really do

like you, Alex. I can't wait to get to know you better."

I wanted to say I felt the same, or *ditto*, or *something*, but my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. Only thing I managed was another small smile, before ducking my head down to focus on my sandwich and my chips. And my vanilla milkshake. My favourite part of Burger King food.

I was worried he would think I didn't feel the same, but when I dared a glance at him, he seemed to still be in his constantly good mood. He was so easy-going. He was fit, he played football, he was handsome. What was he doing with me?

He could have anyone he wanted. Yet here he was, with me.

It was unbelievable. It was amazing. I didn't want it to end.

Seven

Obviously, I ended up in bed with him again. The evening couldn't have ended any differently. I didn't mind at all, because sex with him was just as amazing this time around as it had been the first time.

I was on my side, feeling self-conscious about my bare arms. He pressed up against my back, head resting in the crook of my neck. His hand was thrown over me, his fingers playing softly with my fingers. The scars didn't even seem to faze him.

"I want to be a policeman," he muttered, his breath warm as it fanned over my bare skin. "When school's over, I'm doing the compulsory service in the army, then I'm going to go to the Police Academy."

"Army, huh? They won't even want to touch me." Not that I had ever wanted to go to the army. I wasn't made out for that.

"Yeah, I know." He did touch my scars now, startling me with the determination he had as he stroked over them.

"They're not going to want someone who does this to themselves." I watched his hand. I couldn't take my eyes off it. It was so tan against the pale skin of my scars, against the red skin of the still-healing cuts. "They're not going to want someone who's already broken."

"If you're broken, you can be fixed." He kissed my shoulder softly. His stubble scraped wonderfully. "Do you want to go to the army?"

"No." That came quick, momentary.

"What do you want to do then?"

"I don't know." My future had never been something I'd thought about. I had enough trouble getting through the day. I'd been about to kill myself. I wouldn't have had any future then. I still might not have when this thing between us ended.

Which would be soon. He'd grow tired of me, I knew he would. Everyone did.

"Well, you have lots of time to decide. Months still until you have to apply to schools."

"Yeah." Still, how was I supposed to figure out what I wanted to do with my life in just a few months when all the plan I'd had was to die?

It wasn't something I wanted to think about now. "Have you always known you wanted to be a policeman?" Better to change the subject back to him.

"Yeah, I guess. I went through the normal phases—fireman,

astronaut, *prince*—but police was what stuck." His arm slid around me, tightening, keeping me there pressed up against him. It was good, nice, safe.

My eyes threatened to fall shut.

"I should leave," I muttered.

"Why? You can just stay here."

"You want me to stay the night?" My chest squeezed. Hopeful, yet afraid he'd say no.

"Yeah." Of course he didn't say no. He hadn't said no about anything since we met on Friday. He'd just taken me along with him and I'd enjoyed every second of it. "Don't you want to stay?"

"I do," I whispered. I put my own arm atop his, squeezing his forearm. "I do want to stay."

"Good." And he kissed my shoulder again, and my body reacted. Sleep was suddenly far from my mind.

I turned my body slightly, as far as I was able to with how tight his arm was holding me. My face was close to his, and I leaned in to kiss him. He returned it, happily, and his arm unwrapped from around me to instead rest on my chest and cup my jaw.

All thoughts of my future, or lack of one, and of sleep were gone from my mind, replaced instead by the smell of him, the feel of him, and the desire coursing through my body. All because of him.

I locked myself into the house, relieved when I didn't hear raised voices. Maybe they were out. Maybe they were still asleep—despite the fact that it should be too late in the day for that. I didn't put anything past them, though.

"Where have you been?"

I spun around at the hoarse, grumpy voice. My dad stood in the living room doorway.

"Hmm?"

"You're spending an awful lot of time out of the house." He frowned at me suspiciously.

"I—What?" What was with the questions? He never asked me questions. "Since when do you care where I spend my time?"

"Don't mouth off!"

To my horror, my mum came out from the bathroom to my left. Dad still frowned at me, but Mum looked livid.

Why couldn't they be normal? Why couldn't they get a divorce? Why couldn't they get locked up in a bloody mental hospital?

"I didn't— It was just a question." Why did she have to be home? Dad was okay on his own, but when Mum was there, they were both a nightmare to be around.

I inched towards the stairs. I didn't want to be anywhere close to them. Any moment now, they would be at each other's throats, instead of mine.

"Stop with your bloody questions!" She was getting riled up. For absolutely nothing.

"Don't take that tone, Eva!" And there, Dad went off.

I ran up the stairs before I had to endure more than raised voices. I didn't go to my room. Instead, I locked myself in the bathroom. The tears already trickled. I hated it. I hated *them*. Couldn't they ever stop? Why did they have to be like that?

Rolling up the sleeves of my jumper, I had the razor out and ready before I even registered it. It cut into my skin, splitting it. Blood trickled out and dripped down to the white sink.

Why couldn't I have normal parents? Parents who cared? Parents who didn't fight and who weren't abusive and who'd neglected both me and my siblings?

A few tears dropped down on my newly cut arm, and the saline burned the cuts. I hissed, but it was *pain*, pain like the cutting itself was. For once I felt something, something other than useless, worthless, something other than what my parents' fighting made me feel.

It was calming. The tears stopped, and I sat down on the toilet seat to watch the blood make its way past the scars to the edges of my arm, where it dripped to the floor between my feet. It was fascinating and horrifying at the same time.

The more I watched, the calmer I became. My breath calmed, my tears dried up, but the blood kept trickling. *Oh, god.*

I stood up to clean myself. Once my arm was firmly bandaged up, I made sure to clean the floor and the sink as well, so there were no more traces of blood.

Andreas… He might like me when the scars were scars. But would he like me when I had fresh cuts? Fresh cuts that could be torn up and that would start bleeding again?

Would he still feel the same about me as he'd done?

I shuffled into my bedroom, and locked that door as well. I didn't want any of them to come in and start assaulting me. I wouldn't put it past either of them.

I curled up in bed, my injured arm pressed to my chest. Why did everything have to be so difficult? Why was it so easy to live when I was with Andreas, when I spent the days and nights with him, but so very, very hard once I came home?

Why couldn't life be simple?

Dying.

It was a strong word—definite. No one knew what happened after a person died. It should be scary to even think about, least of all to contemplate, but it wasn't. I'd made my peace with it, only now it was all messed up.

Because of Andreas.

I couldn't die. Not now. Not when he was interested in me—and I most certainly was interested in him. I'd never had this before, someone interested in me the way he was, and I wanted to be alive to see how it would unfold, how long it'd be before he'd grow tired of me.

I turned over on my other side, dragging the duvet and my book with me. I held the book open, but it couldn't hold my attention. Nothing much could—except thoughts of Andreas. The house was quiet, so either my parents had gone out or they'd given up the arguing. Giving up wasn't likely, so one of them had probably left. Most likely Mum, or else I'd hear her clattering around. Dad was the quiet one, at least when he was home alone and didn't have her screaming at him.

Dying, yes. It had seemed like the only way out. I didn't have anyone, no one cared, and my parents were so busy arguing and fighting with each other that I was invisible to them unless I got in the way of their dysfunctional, abusive relationship.

It still seemed like a good way out. As long as I was in school, I couldn't earn enough to support myself, so I couldn't move out. I was stuck right where I was.

I turned back over the other way. I couldn't find a comfortable position. The book wasn't interesting enough to hold my interest. I'd barely started it, so it was likely a sign I shouldn't continue.

It dropped with a *thunk* onto the bedside table as I sat up, running my hands through my hair in frustration. Now that I was very much alive, and not dead like the plan had been, I didn't know what to do with myself.

I reached for my phone, fumbled with it. Andreas hadn't asked me over today because he'd had football practice. He hadn't even suggested we meet up afterwards, because surely it must be over by now? I didn't know how long those things lasted.

Then again… Andreas had asked me out to the cinema. Maybe I should take the initiative now? Not that I had anything in particular we could do. All I knew was sex, and we'd already had plenty of that.

But… My eyes fell on the book. It held absolutely no interest. I should hand it back in and borrow a new one.

Me: Are you busy?

The moment I clicked send, I regretted it. It sounded so *lame*. I

should've just asked if he wanted to go the library with me.

I worried my lower lip, afraid he wouldn't answer, but my phone beeped with an incoming message, startling me.

Andreas: Not at all. What's up?

Me: I'm heading down to the library. Want to come with?

Did that sound good? Or did it sound like I was desperate for him to join me? Or maybe I sound cool about it, like it wouldn't matter if he'd rather not?

Andreas: Sure. Meet at playground in 15?

I sent back a quick affirmative, exactly like I'd done when he'd asked me to the cinema. That'd been more of a date than what I'd suggested. The library wasn't exactly a place to bring someone you were close to. Or someone you had sex with, anyway. I didn't think the library was a place he used to frequent either, as he didn't seem the type, but of course, I could be mistaken about that.

He was at the playground before me this time, and I hurried up to him, a bit flushed from how fast I'd been walking to reach it. I'd had to change clothes and bandages before I could go outside, just in case we'd end up back at his place again. I didn't want him to get an eyeful of bloody bandages.

"Hey."

He looked fit in his loose jeans and open hoodie. The T-shirt he had on underneath stretched nicely over his chest.

"Library, huh?" he asked as we started walking, side by side along the pavement. "You go there often?"

"Well, yeah." I fiddled with the book I carried. It was old, and the cover frayed at the edges. "I borrow a lot of books. I *read* a lot of books." It was the only other thing besides studying I did, though studying consisted of a lot of reading too.

"What kind of books do you read?"

"Fiction. Fantasy. Science fiction." I read whatever caught my interest, really. I wasn't all that picky, not as long as the book managed to hold my interest.

He glanced at me, smiled wryly. "I don't read much."

"What do you like to do?" I knew he played football, and that he liked sex just as much as I did, and that he wanted to be a policeman, but other than that…

"Football. Working out. Playing video-games. Go out partying with the lads. Normal guy stuff, really." He shrugged, then his gaze turned shrewd and he took a step closer to me so our shoulders brushed. "Get laid."

Get laid in general or get laid with me? I didn't dare ask, but it was probably both. Get laid in general before me, and now when I was willing, to get laid with me. I didn't mind. I liked having sex with him,

too. Quite a lot. So much so that my plans had been irrevocably altered. Maybe for the better.

So far, anyway.

"Do you do enjoy anything else, besides reading?"

"Studying."

Now he was full on staring at me. "Reading and studying? That's all you do?"

I shrugged awkwardly. "And work, but I can't actually say I enjoy that. That's more something I *have* to do, else I wouldn't have any money."

"Your parents don't pay for stuff for you? Give you money?"

"No." I shook my head for emphasis. "They did when I was younger, when I couldn't get a job because I was *too* young, but as soon as I turned fifteen, I basically had to fend for myself." In a matter of speaking. I'd had to fend for myself ever since Leo left, really.

He faced forward again, but I could see he was frowning. "I haven't even met your parents, and I really don't like them."

"That's okay. I don't like them either." I managed a tight smile. It was a fact of life—that I didn't care for them. After everything they'd put me through, after living my entire life under their roof and with their dysfunction, how could I possibly hold any warm feelings for them?

He bumped my shoulder with his. "You've got me now."

I blinked, startled at the words that had left him in such a matter-of-fact way. Did I actually have him? For now, yes, as long as the sex was new and interesting and good. But how long would that last?

It never lasted long with all the other blokes I'd been with, but then, they'd never been interested in meeting with me unless we had sex. Andreas had asked me out to the *cinema*. No one had ever done that before.

His words warmed, but I didn't know what to answer, so I refrained from answering at all.

The library loomed up in front of us now, once we crossed the street from Burger King. We headed down and around to the entrance, and I handed over my book to the librarian behind the desk, before I led the way upstairs to the adult section. Downstairs was reserved for kids, newspapers, and the reception area.

"I don't think I've ever been in here to borrow a book." Andreas looked around as we emerged up on the first floor. "Maybe when I was younger. I remember Mum used to read to us a lot. But after she died…" He shook his head in wonder. "Don't think I've been here once."

"It's nice here." I headed over to the section for English fantasy

literature. I'd read everything of interest in the Norwegian teen section, unless they'd got something new, but with Andreas trailing me, I felt I should go for the more adult literature anyway. "You're not even a little tempted to borrow something?"

"No." He grinned, it looked a bit apologetic, as if he thought he should apologise for it. "I get enough reading at school. I don't need to take it up as a hobby on my private time. I've got more than enough other stuff to interest me." He crammed his hands in his pockets and leaned against the side of the shelf I was perusing. "We're quite different, you and I."

"Yeah." I glanced at him. Where was this going? That we were *too* different?

"That whole saying about opposites attract… I suppose it's true." He grinned again, wide and happy, like he didn't have a single worry at all. He was so easy-going that my own worries seemed to fall of the wayside. Being around him… it was uplifting.

He was an uplifting kind of person.

"When you're done with whatever you're doing, borrowing books or whatever, feel up for some Chinese food? I'd just got home from practice when you texted, and I'm starving."

Another date? More of a date than this was, anyway. "Yeah. Sure. I haven't had dinner yet, either." I hadn't wanted to go downstairs and make something. First, because my parents had been screaming at each other, and then because I'd been afraid one of them was still home and would start screaming at me if I showed my face. Dad was usually safe to be around when he was alone, but Mum was a whole other matter.

He smiled then. Not a grin, but an honest kind of smile that showed he was more than happy to spend time with me. To go out eating with me. It was so new, but also so good. I hoped we'd last a while, or until I got myself out of this rut, anyway.

I didn't doubt for a second I would go through with my plans if this thing between us were to end right now. Or tomorrow. But if it lasted for a bit, if my depression lifted before it happened, than maybe I could even go on with my life without his easy-going, warm, safe presence in it.

Maybe.

But for now, he was in my life. And though I knew I was still depressed, it lifted when I was around him. I'd take what I could get. Take it one day at a time. Enjoy myself with what I had. Because I had him—and I really liked having him in my life.

That, and he seemed to enjoy having me in his, too.

I plucked a book I'd been interested in last time I'd been here down from the shelf, scanned the backside, then nodded to myself as I

made my decision.

"Ready to go?" He eyed me.

"Yeah." Our hands brushed as I walked past him, and he reached out to squeeze mine properly. I stopped, turned back to look at him, and found him gazing at me with a small smile. I managed one as well, an embarrassed one, but one nonetheless.

I was lucky. Lucky that he'd decided to come chat with me when he had. That he'd invited me home, invited me out to the party —no matter how I'd felt during it. That he'd invited me back home with him afterwards… That he wanted more than just to get a shag out of me.

So bloody lucky. And I wasn't sure how I'd managed it, this thing between us. But it was nice, good, and for once in my life, it left me hopeful.

Hopeful that maybe life wasn't so shitty after all.

Part Two

Let Me See Your Scars

Eight

Time seemed to speed up after that day. I kept spending time with Andreas, mostly with him alone, but at lunch we sat with his mates. Glenn still basically ignored me, but he'd stopped coming up with slurs when we were in class, so I guessed I should consider myself lucky.

I spent the evenings I wasn't working with Andreas, unless he had football practice. He was on one of the town's football teams together with both Glenn and Peter, and they had training two evenings a week. Sometimes his training coincided with my work schedule, sometimes it didn't. It didn't really matter, because I knew I would see him again the next day.

I spent the nights at his place, too, especially the days we had sex after school. Nothing was official between us, not even after two and a half months, but I guess we were acting like a couple. We were exclusive, as neither of us slept with anyone else. We had enough sex with each other and it was *good* sex.

Still, it wasn't like we told anyone what we were doing, though I guess they must know. Ben knew, obviously, but I suspected the rest of his family did, too, considering how many nights I spent there. No friend ever slept over as often as I did. And sleeping over at Andreas', sharing a bed with him… it was heaven compared to my home situation.

Life seemed a little lighter and easier too. I wasn't magically fixed, because I still cut myself when things got too much at home, but at least my life wasn't as bleak as it had been anymore. I was glad I hadn't ended it all when I'd planned to, and so damn grateful for him to decide to be nice to me that day.

Though my social life had vastly improved in the last two months, my home life was still as miserable as ever.

I had the weekend off of work, and I was spending it with Andreas, so all I was doing at home was dropping off my rucksack and packing a bag. He must have known that it was bad for me at home, because he'd asked me to stay the entire weekend at his place. I hadn't directly told him about my parents, but he was very perceptive.

I entered the house, my mood good for once, but that shattered along with whatever was thrown across the living room.

"How fucking dare you throw that stupid thing at me?" Dad shouted.

"Shut the fuck up!" Mum screamed back at him. "It's your own fucking fault I'm throwing things at you! Fucking piece of shit of an excuse of a man!" Her heels clicked against the floor. She hadn't even

been home long enough to take off her shoes, and still she'd started in on the fighting.

"Don't you fucking walk away from me, Eva!" I could hear my dad follow her. They were headed right for the hallway, and I turned in a panic to grope for the doorknob. I didn't want to face them, I couldn't face them.

"I can walk wherever the hell I want in my own home!" Mum cried, and then she slammed the living room door open.

I was halfway out the door, but I did the mistake of glancing over my shoulder on my way out. She stared at me with narrowed eyes. "Where are you going?" she snapped, hands propped on her hips.

"Out." I gulped. I hated being put on the spot, especially when she was in one of her moods. She was usually in one, but I could tell today was an especially bad one. "I can't stand being here anymore," I forced out, hating to speak my mind, but hoping maybe she'd calm down if I did. I was her son, after all—maybe actually hearing me say it would make her feel bad.

It had the opposite effect.

"Shut up!" She strode over to me and in one gliding movement, she'd raised her hand and slapped me hard across the face. I could feel my cheekbone throbbing where her nails had raked against my face. "We are giving you a home. Food and water! You ungrateful little shit!"

I felt my cheek, and blood trickled over my fingertips. I stared up at her with wide eyes. She was taller than me when wearing heels. There was no reaction in them, no startled realisation of what she'd done, no regret. Nothing.

I turned around and ran out of there.

I leaned my forehead against the wall over the doorbell, then pressed it in. My cheeks were wet with tears and blood and I knew I must look a right mess, but there was only one place I could go, and this was it.

The door opened, and though I'd hoped Andreas would be the one to answer, I knew I wouldn't be so lucky. I stepped away from the wall, knowing that whoever it was would see me in the light from inside.

It was Andreas' uncle who looked at me. "Hi, Alex," he smiled in greeting, then his smile fell away as he looked at my bloody cheek. "Come on in." He stepped out of the way, and I brushed past him. "Come to the kitchen and I'll get you cleaned up."

I shuffled after him into the brightly-lit room. He left me

sitting on one of the kitchen chairs, then disappeared. I sat twiddling my thumbs awkwardly. The tears had stopped, at least.

He returned not long after with what he'd need to fix me up. He even snapped on a pair of sterile gloves. "I'm a doctor," he said, once he saw me eyeing them. "I can't get out of the habit, not even at home."

I sat still, with my head tilted to the side as he cleaned the scrapes. It burned a little, but I was used to pain so it didn't faze me at all. When Thomas had put on a couple of butterfly plasters on my cheek, he threw what he'd used in the rubbish and packed everything else up.

He snapped off his gloves and threw them away, too. I expected him to go back to wherever he'd got his stash and put it away, but he stayed on his kitchen chair, facing me.

"Why don't you tell me what happened?"

"It's nothing, really." I bent my head.

"That was not nothing."

"I talked back to my mum," I mumbled. "She doesn't like people talking back at her."

"She scratches whoever does?"

I closed my eyes briefly. "Usually she just throws stuff at my dad."

"So your mum's abusive?"

"I—Yeah, I guess." I hitched my shoulders up awkwardly. "They're always yelling and fighting. It's always been like that. My older siblings have moved out, so it's only me left now." Not that anything had changed. I was still ignored, or something was thrown at me when I got in the way. And, obviously, I was slapped when I dared open my mouth to say something she didn't like to hear.

Thomas leaned back in his chair. He crossed his arms over his chest and his eyes never left my face. It was disconcerting and I shifted uncomfortably. "You can always come here; you know that, right? If you don't want to stay at home, our door is always open."

I knew I should say something, preferably *thanks*, but a lump stuck in my throat, making speech impossible. Instead, I nodded as I fought the tears. *I'm always so emotional.* Just a simple show of kindness and the waterworks started.

"The same goes if you need someone to talk to. If you don't want to talk to Andreas, I'm always here to lend an ear. Or a shoulder to cry on." He leaned over and put a hand on my shoulder. That nearly made me lose the fragile control I had over myself. "I'm afraid I sent Andreas and Maria out to the supermarket. But if you want to be alone, you can head on down to his room. I'll let him know you're here when he gets home. If you do want company, you're welcome to

stay here and watch me start on dinner."

I wiped at the underside of my eyes to get rid of a few tears that had started to trickle. "If you don't mind, I think I'll just go downstairs and rest for a bit."

He only nodded and smiled at me.

I stopped before walking out the door and turned to him. He was still watching me. "Thank you," I whispered. "For everything."

"No problem at all, Alex."

Nine

I went downstairs and fell onto Andreas' big, soft bed. He'd changed the sheets since the last time and they didn't smell of his cologne like they used to. We'd each adopted our side of the bed whenever I slept over, and I curled up on his side now. I buried my face in his pillow, even if it didn't smell like him, and closed my eyes.

I was exhausted. I shouldn't have been, I'd only been to school today, but I guessed my parents fighting, not to mention being slapped, took the energy out of me.

I fell asleep right there, and only woke up when a big, warm body pressed up against my back. Stubble raked the thin skin on my neck, then a soft kiss was placed right underneath my jaw.

A soft moan escaped me and I reached back to bury my hand in Andreas' thick, coarse hair. It was short, but I could still get a good grip on it.

His arm slid over my waist and he pulled my shirt up so he could get at my nipples. He rolled the nubs in between his fingers, going from one to the other and back again. He teased me and it worked so wonderfully.

"Thomas said you were here already." He nipped gently at my skin, which was a move he'd learned drove me wild. "Imagine coming in here finding you all snuggled up with my pillow. Best sight ever."

A laugh escaped me at that. "This is like the best wake-up ever," I returned in a breathy voice. I pushed my arse back against him, then ran my hand over his hip. He was wearing joggers, while I was in jeans. They weren't exactly comfortable sleeping in. "Do we have time for—?" I cupped his cock in my palm, making my meaning clear without actually having to say it.

"Mmm, yeah, should have. He's making lasagna, and that should be in the oven for almost an hour." He unbuttoned my jeans quickly and pulled them down, so he could get at my dick. It hardened up instantly in his big, warm, calloused hand.

He stroked me slowly at first, while his lips travelled up and down my neck, alternating between kissing me and nipping at me. I couldn't choose which one I preferred more.

I kicked my jeans off of my feet. They were in the way, and I put one leg over Andreas' thigh, so he had better range to move his hand between my legs. I could feel his cock against my arse, also hard now, but trapped in underpants and joggers. I shifted slightly, so I wasn't quite as much on my side and was more on my back. I reached into his clothes and took his cock out, so I could work it while he did mine.

His tongue ran over my Adam's apple, and I tilted my head back. He moved up and soon his lips were on mine. It was a sweet kiss, all lips and a little bit of tongue.

His stroking felt good, but I needed more. I needed the cock currently in my hand inside me. I needed him to fuck me, like he always did so wonderfully. "Andreas, lube," I whispered against his lips.

He started to draw away from me and I turned back on my side so he wouldn't see my injured cheek. Seeing it would probably ruin the mood, and we were both in such a good mood now.

He was back only a couple of seconds later. His fingers were already lubed and they now teased over my hole. I moved further onto my side, almost on my stomach but not quite. I spread my legs so he'd have a better time of prepping me, and he took the hint instantly as he slid his middle finger inside me.

He was always so careful about the stretching, probably because he was so big. "Do girls have trouble with your size too?" I surprised myself by asking. It wasn't that I had particular trouble with it, but then he always did stretch me good before he ever pushed inside.

"Yeah." He thrust his finger in and out. "It takes time to make them loose enough too, even if they don't need lube, so it's not just blokes."

I'd never had sex with a girl. I had no idea how they worked during sex. I reckoned anal sex must be quite the same with them, but vaginal… I couldn't even imagine it.

He slid another finger into me, blowing all thoughts of girls out of my mind. I didn't even know why the thought had even inserted itself into my mind to begin with.

He slid into me. Both my shoulders were pressed down against the bed now, as he braced his hands against them while pushing into me. I didn't mind his weight pushing me into the mattress at all; in fact, it made me feel safe, protected, maybe even *loved*. Something I'd never felt before.

He set a slow rhythm of pulling back, thrusting back in, but it increased speed rather quickly. His hands gripped my shoulders tightly, to the point I was sure I was going to have marks there later, but I couldn't care one way or another. It felt too good, that tight grip bordering on pain, coupled with his big cock thrusting inside me, in and out, in and out.

It all drove me wild. I reached down with one hand to fist my dick. While I usually came just from anal intercourse, I felt a sudden want to wank off while he worked my body. So my hand stroked my cock in time with his thrusts, and all was wonderful.

The rest of the world fell away, my family life and my cutting and everything bad disappeared while we were joined like this, while we worked each other and made love to each other.

Neither of us had ever mentioned the L-word, but it felt like it. Whenever we were as close as we were now, I did feel loved. I wasn't sure if it was going to last or not, but we had this right now and it was good. It was more than good, it was fantastic. It was enough for me, at least for now. He was my friend, we had amazing sex, and he was there for me. What else could I possibly need?

He adjusted his grip on my shoulders, then slammed into me harder. His balls slapped against my skin, and that coupled with his groans were all the sound I could hear in that moment. It was starting to become so familiar, after two months with him. Two months of more sex than I could ever count.

I was usually the one who came first, because anal was simply that pleasurable to me. Sometimes, though, he did, and this was one of those times. His hips stuttered as his orgasm started, then he started thrusting again as he rode through it. I stroked my own cock wildly, wanting to join him in orgasm, and I soon tipped over that edge as well.

A groan left me when he pulled out. He bent down to place a kiss between my shoulder blades, and then got off the bed. He exited the room, and I wondered what he was doing as I stretched out and rolled my shoulders.

I was definitely going to be feeling the grip he'd had on me later, but for now, it was just a dull ache. The sheet was wet under me and I scooted over a bit so I didn't lie in my own semen. I felt bad about coming on his newly-changed bed, but where else was I supposed to have shot?

He came back into the bedroom and the mattress moved as he sat back down on it. Something soft and warm pressed against my arse and I turned my head to look down at what he was doing. He had a towel bunched in his hand and he cleaned me up carefully.

"Thank you," I whispered, putting my chin on my forearm. He'd already pulled on his clothes, so I supposed he'd washed himself in the bathroom. "Do you think we smell like sex?" I sat up once he dropped the towel on the floor and turned around to face him.

My jumper, which had been pulled up to under my arms through our entire encounter, now fell back down to cover my torso. I felt a bit ridiculous sitting there dressed on top while my lower body was completely nude, but the look he gave me was one of interest.

"I hope not." He grinned. "I cleaned us up, at least. That's more than we do at night."

That was true. When we had sex whenever I spent the night,

we'd usually fall asleep right after without bothering with any sort of clean-up.

"Hey…" He turned my head to the side, brows drawing together in a frown. "What happened to your face?"

"Oh." Right. I'd forgotten about it temporarily, but it was still plastered up. "Thomas didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?" He asked, effectively answering my question.

"He cleaned me up." I ran my fingers over my cheekbone to feel the plasters.

"Who did this to you?" Andreas' lips were pressed together. He was angry.

"My mum," I whispered, glancing away from him. I knew he was angry because someone had hurt me, but I didn't like anger. Anger lead to arguments and fighting, and it had been a big part of my entire life. I hated it.

"Oh, shit, babe." He cupped the back of my neck in one palm and leaned forward to press his cheek against my uninjured side.

That was better. Loads better, in fact, than the anger. I hugged him back.

There came a knock on the bedroom door. "Dinner!" Ben called through it.

For a second, I was worried he'd come in, but he continued past the door towards the stairs. I untangled myself from Andreas to pull on my underpants and jeans. My face was flushed, because the thought that Ben might've come in was mortifying—but also because I could feel Andreas staring at me as I dressed.

"Stop it." I glanced over my shoulder at him.

"Sorry, I can't help it." He grinned, taking the piss out of me.

I reached out to push him, but he grabbed me and dragged me onto the bed. I laughed as I fought his grip around me, but he was both bigger and stronger and he managed to trap me underneath him. He held my wrists above my head and then leaned down to kiss me softly. "I like looking at you. Get used to it." He rubbed his nose against mine, then let me go and rose to his feet. He held his hand out. "Let's go eat some dinner."

I smiled and shook my head, but his words were sincere and I believed them. I took his hand and let him pull me up on my feet. I stepped close, kissed his cheek, and then followed him upstairs.

Ten

We went out for a walk after dinner.

Andreas had suggested it and I went with it. It would be nice to get out in fresh air, anyway. I also suspected he wanted to talk to me in private, without the chance of any of his family members disrupting us.

We walked for a while in silence, heading towards the centre of town.

"So," he said eventually. He walked at my side, with his hands buried in his pockets. "Does your mum hit you often?"

"Not really." While he had his hands in his jogger pockets, I had mine buried in my jacket pockets. "I smarted off to her, and when she's in a fit, that's not really a good thing to do."

"Is she in a fit often?"

"Well, yeah. Most of the time, but I usually stay out of the way. She and Dad, they're—they don't get along. They argue, they scream at each other, they hit each other, they throw things at each other."

"Why don't they just separate?"

I laughed bitterly. "That's a good question. I don't have an answer for it." I glanced over at him, but though the streetlights were shining above us, I couldn't see his face when he had his head bowed. "At first I thought maybe they stayed together for the children, like you see all the time on the telly, on documentaries and stuff. Not that it's a good environment to grow up in when they always argue and fight like that. But then my siblings moved out, and I was left, and it's not like they give a shit about me. So if they should've separated, they could've done it then. But they didn't."

"That's messed up."

"Yeah. It is." It was the only way to sum it up.

"How old are your siblings?"

I had to think about that. "Uh, Camilla's twenty-six and Leo's twenty…" I trailed off as I did some quick math in my head. "Twenty-three."

"Where are they now?"

"Camilla fucked off years ago with some boyfriend of hers. I think she lives up north now. I haven't spoken to her since she left. Leo's studying; he's only five hours away, but he hardly ever comes home." I did, however, have a semblance of a relationship with Leo, which was more than I could say about my sister. Leo called me every year on my birthday, and sporadically through the year. When he did come to town, he never stayed at home, but with friends. I couldn't

blame him at all.

"I can't imagine not having my sisters around," Andreas muttered thoughtfully.

I glanced over at him again, but I still couldn't make out his face. We headed away from the main road and streetlights now as we started down towards the marina. There was a shortcut towards the town centre through it.

"Can I ask what happened to your parents?"

His head swiveled towards me briefly at that, but he bowed it quickly again. "My mum died when I was ten, so it's eight years ago now. It was a car crash, so none of us saw it coming, you know? My dad got really depressed after that. His whole world, his whole reason for living, was just gone. Taken away from us like that. Three years later, he hanged himself in our garage. Christina was the one who found him. She had an early day at school, she came home and he hung there. Maria and I were still in school. I remember being taken out of class and into the Vice Principal's office, where Uncle Thomas waited for us." He quieted after that, but I didn't need him to continue. I could imagine the grief they'd all felt after that, losing first their mum, then their dad only a few years later.

I didn't know what to say. *I'm sorry* would be too trite, because how could I say *sorry* for something that wasn't my fault? So I reached out and slid my arm around his elbow. I wasn't sure it would help him in any way, but a least I offered my silent support.

"We were lucky, though," Andreas continued eventually. "We had Thomas. He's the absolute best. Without him, we would've gone into the foster care system, because Christina was only sixteen, and Maria and I even younger."

"Yeah, Thomas is amazing," I agreed. I proceeded to tell him just what Thomas had told me after he'd patched up my cheek.

Andreas chuckled once I'd finished speaking. "Thomas doesn't limit himself to just family, but to his nephew's boyfriend as well." I tensed up for just a second at that word, but he noticed it, because he stopped walking. "What?"

"No, nothing. Just that word," I muttered, embarrassed.

"We are, aren't we? Boyfriends?" He seemed unsure now.

"I don't know." I shrugged helplessly. "You never asked."

"Oh." He was taken aback.

I regretted my initial reaction. We had something good going, and we were acting like a couple, even if it hadn't been made official.

"I'm sorry. Sometimes I take things for granted, you know, and I just assume that everyone's on board with me."

Assuming those kinds of things of someone you had regular sex with was a normal thing. I knew it was, but I was too messed up to

ever trust in it. Who could possibly want anything more than sex from me, after all?

"It's okay." Really, it was. I never should've opened my mouth. I should've just gone with it.

He moved in front of me and then he dropped down on one knee.

"What are you doing?" I asked, startled. I could see someone coming towards us up ahead, but other than that, we were alone.

"I'm asking you, so shut up." I could see his grin just barely, but his tone of voice told me it was there as well. "So, Alex, will you be my boyfriend?"

My heart was, as per usual, beating wildly. From happiness this time, though. "Yes. Yes, I'll be your boyfriend."

Andreas stood up and wrapped his arms around me as he kissed me. I locked my arms around his neck and kissed him back enthusiastically.

I now officially had a boyfriend. I wouldn't have to worry if we were or if we weren't anymore. Now I could enjoy our time together, knowing that we were in an actual relationship.

"From that very first day I spoke to you, I knew I wanted you. Not just as someone to fuck, but as my boyfriend. I'm sorry I didn't make that clear to you." He kissed me again.

"What do we have here?"

That voice, deep and male and dripping of contempt, brought us apart. Andreas turned to face the people I'd seen coming. I could see now there were three of them: three blokes. I couldn't tell anything else because of the darkness, but two of them were taller than both of us, while the other was shorter and more thickset.

"Marcus," Andreas said, his voice cold. "What do you want?"

I had no idea who Marcus was, but it was apparent that it was the one who had spoken. I didn't know how Andreas knew him, because I could tell from his tone that he wasn't a friend.

"You know, Glenn said you'd gone queer, but I can't say I believed him. Big, strong lad like you, a poof? But current actions do confirm it."

He was related to Glenn somehow. This scared me, because Glenn *hated* me. He never spoke to me, and he hardly ever looked at me.

These guys gave off a worse vibe than Glenn had ever done, though, especially Marcus. I didn't like this at all. We were in the marina, it was dark, and there was no one else around.

"Bugger off, Marcus." I could tell Andreas was spooked by the entire situation too.

I wanted to leave. I didn't want to stay there anymore. I

wanted to get away from Marcus and his two silent companions. I wanted to go back to Andreas' bedroom and snuggle up in his bed.

"Bugger off? You're telling *me* to bugger off?" Marcus advanced, forcing Andreas back a couple of steps to avoid getting up close and personal to him. "You're Glenn's best mate. Can't have you banging a bloke; that's just not right. My brother is not hanging out with a fucking poof. I won't allow that."

There was a sudden flurry of movement. I didn't even manage a blink before the shorter, thickset bloke had me in a vice grip, and the other silent one pushed Andreas up against the old house opposite the water's edge.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Andreas yelled at Marcus as he fought against the bloke holding him. "Let us go, Marcus, for fuck's sake!"

My breath quickened, going all heavy. What were they going to do to Andreas? Marcus advanced. I could see he held something in his hand, something long and thick.

"I had a plan, Andreas. To beat sense into you the next time I saw you. But upon seeing this little scene between you, I figured out something that would hurt you *more*." Marcus turned away from Andreas and advanced on me. He raised his hand, then swung it back down before I could even manage a feeble struggle. Whatever it was he held smashed against the side of my head.

I was dropped to the ground.

Andreas shouted something, I couldn't make out his words. I could feel the gravel under my hands, against my face. Something trickled down my cheek. My vision swam, but I could see feet go past me, could hear them running.

"Alex!" Andreas was suddenly on his knees next to me, touching my shoulder. "Alex? Oh fuck, fuck, *fuck*. *Alex!*"

I wanted to answer him, but my voice wouldn't work. I was aware of him talking on the phone, but I must've slipped in and out of consciousness, because next thing I knew I was being loaded into an ambulance.

I could still hear Andreas say my name, but he wasn't right beside me now. Someone else touched me, but I lost consciousness again.

Next time I woke, someone shone a light right into my eyes. It hurt, but I couldn't avoid it. Something pricked my hand. Vomit rose, and I got turned on my side as I threw up.

I only got in a couple of shaking breaths before I was sick again.

When I finally was turned on my back again, and the darkness threatened to overwhelm me.

I succumbed to it.

Eleven

I blinked my eyes open.

It was bright, obviously daytime, but I wasn't in my bedroom and neither was I in Andreas'. I turned my head slowly to one side and found, out of everyone, my father sitting in a chair by the bed.

Images flitted back into my mind, of walking in the dark with Andreas, of being cornered by three blokes, of Andreas yelling, of something hitting my head—

"Andreas!" I exclaimed, trying to sit up, but Dad was suddenly there and pushed me back down on the bed. "Where's Andreas? Is he all right? I have to see him." Where was he? Had Marcus hurt him, too? Was he in his own hospital bed?

"Alex, calm down," Dad said firmly. "Calm yourself, and I'll go get your friend. He's in the waiting room. Hasn't left since you came in last night."

I did settle down, because this meant he wasn't hurt, right? Someone who'd been hurt wouldn't be sitting in a waiting room. "Okay. Okay, I'm calm." My breathing was too quick, but I wasn't moving anymore. My little movement earlier had made my head spin, but it subsided slowly as long as I lay quietly.

Dad disappeared, and a few minutes later Andreas filled the doorway. He stared at me, eyes wide and filled with worry.

"Alex." He came over to the bed and took my hand in his. "Shit, *Alex*." His eyes were wet, but he closed them, so I couldn't see how close he was to crying.

"Andreas." I was so relieved to see him alive and well. "What happened?" I knew I'd been hit in the head, but everything after that was fuzzy.

He took a couple of shaking breaths before finally opening his eyes again. They were still wet, but the tears weren't threatening to overflow like they had before.

"He hit you in the head with an iron bar," he whispered. "And I couldn't do anything about it." He bent down to rest his forehead against my chest. "You were awake until they loaded you in the ambulance, and then you started going in and out of consciousness. You almost fell into a coma, Alex." His voice broke over that word and my heart stuttered in my chest.

"Almost?" I forced out through my teeth.

"They couldn't wake you up. You woke up by yourself when they stuck that needle thingy in your hand wrong several times because they couldn't find a vein."

I lifted my head slightly to look down at my hand, and true

enough, there was a needle taped to the back of it. I could also see the entirety of my forearms, because I was in a hospital gown.

My breath hitched in sudden panic, and Andreas surged up to look at me.

"Alex, what is it?"

"Why am I in a short-sleeved gown? Everybody can see my scars!" I started to fold my arms over my chest, but Andreas took my wrists in a hard grip.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," he said, putting his forehead against mine. "Don't worry about people seeing your arms. It doesn't matter. All they'll see is how much you've been hurting, because those scars tell a story. That's nothing to be ashamed of, Alex."

I stared into his brown eyes. They were so warm, so sincere. I relaxed, but it didn't mean I stopped being ashamed. How could I not be ashamed to show my arms? I couldn't show the entire world what I'd done to myself. What Ben had done to hide his scars, get sleeve-tattoos on both of his arms… now that was something.

There was a knock on the open door, and I tilted my head slightly to see Thomas enter. He was in scrubs and a white coat, so he must have been on shift. "Hi, Alex, how are you feeling?"

"Good."

"You look good, too." Andreas brushed hair away from my forehead. "A heck of a lot better than you did last night." He got a haunted look in his eyes and my chest squeezed.

I let my gaze fall down his body. "You're not wearing the same clothes as you did last night."

"Ah, no." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Those clothes were full of your blood. The hospital rang Thomas, and he came down with a change. He sat with me, even if he had to go in for his shift this morning." He looked up at Thomas and smiled gratefully.

"I'd do that for each and every one of you." Thomas put a hand on Andreas' shoulder and squeezed, then sat down in the chair my father had left when he went to go find Andreas. I wondered for a second where he'd gone off to, then decided it didn't matter. "So, Alex. They're releasing you today, and I think you should come home with us."

"I can?" I glanced between Thomas and Andreas, surprised. I was pleased, though, because the last thing I wanted to do was go home to my parents' house. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." Thomas nodded. "I don't think you should go back to that environment, especially not now, after suffering head trauma. But even if you hadn't been bashed last night, Alex, I would still want you to stay with us. No one should have to live with parents

who doesn't get along."

His words left me all kinds of emotional and I bowed my head to try and fight my tears without them noticing. Thomas was so kind. He didn't even know me, and just because Andreas cared for me, he was nice to me. "Thank you so much," I whispered.

Andreas rubbed my arm soothingly, right over the scars, but he didn't even falter once in his movements. And I realised, again, that my arms were bare for everyone to see. I cast a quick glance at Thomas, but he was looking at my face, not my arms.

So was Andreas, for that matter.

"When can I get out of here?" My head was fine as long as I didn't make any quick movements with it. I was ready to go home, get out of the hospital gown and into my own comfortable clothes. Or Andreas', because all of my clothes were at home. I wasn't sure I could stand stopping by there today.

And right then, when I was content with the company I had, Dad stepped back into the room. I grabbed a hold of Andreas' hand—I didn't want to face my dad.

Thomas leaned over to speak into my ear. "Do you want me to stay while you talk to him? Or do you want me to talk to him?"

"Can you talk to him?" I almost begged. "I can't…"

Thomas nodded as he straightened up. He motioned for Dad to go back out of the room again, and Dad shot him a confused look. He glanced at me and at Andreas, but he did allow himself to be shooed out into the hallway by Thomas.

"Are you okay with this?" I asked in a low voice as I played with Andreas' fingers. I didn't want to meet his eyes, in case he wasn't.

"Of course. This means having you around every night. How can I complain?" He bent closer, tilted my head up, then put his forehead to mine again. "I was so scared last night. I thought—I thought I'd lost you. I'd just asked you to be my boyfriend and then fucking Marcus shows up, ruining everything." He cleared his voice. "I talked to the police last night. I told them what that happened. I reported them, because they're not going to get away with this."

Dread settled in my stomach at that. "What does that mean? What's going to happen?" I knew Andreas wanted to be a policeman, but I had no idea how it worked.

"Well, there'll probably be some sort of trial. At least a judge will be involved to settle it. If Marcus is found guilty, he can, worst-case scenario, only be told to pay you a certain sum as compensation for the damage he caused you. Best-case scenario, he'll get a prison sentence."

"Will I have to tell the police my side?"

“Yeah. But not right now. You’re hurt, you’re coming home to rest, and then we can go down to the station sometime next week so they can get your version. They’re probably going to pick Marcus up today, I reckon. I don’t know who his mates are, but hopefully he’ll give them up.”

That was good news, at least.

I hoped he’d get a prison sentence. Hitting me in the head with an iron bar just because I was gay and together with his brother’s best friend… that was sick. No person with a good sense of morals did something like that to another person. He needed help—but I hoped they locked him up at the same time.

Twelve

I wasn't discharged until Thomas' shift was over, and Andreas stayed with me all those hours.

My dad hadn't come back in after his chat with Thomas, which I'd been grateful for. I had nothing to say to him. At least he'd shown up; I had to give him props for that. It was more than Mum had done. But then that hadn't really come as a surprise. She hadn't gone to the hospital with Leo that time he broke his hand falling out of a tree, either.

I stretched out on the sofa while Thomas went to fix dinner. I could tell Andreas was debating between helping him and staying with me, because he glanced from the sofa to the kitchen doorway.

He settled on staying with me, and I lifted my legs up so he could sit down. I draped them back over his lap, and he started rubbing my sock-clad feet.

Thomas had actually brought a shift of Andreas' clothes for me as well, so now I was in joggers and a thick hoodie.

Andreas gave me the front passenger seat when we drove home, and I'd got a look at my face in the mirror. I looked dreadful. I still had the butterfly plasters on my cheek where my mum had scratched me, but I was even more messed up on the other side. Gravel had scraped me up, so the entire side of my face was filled with abrasions.

My head was wrapped up where the iron bar had connected with my skull, as well. They'd had to shave some of my hair to get to the cut, but I should prize myself lucky. I could've got permanent brain damage if he'd hit me any harder, or just a fraction to either side.

As it was, I was going to make a full recovery, and I'd take a shaved spot on the side of my head any day for that.

Someone rang the doorbell, but they came right in, so Andreas didn't get up. My mood sank when I heard Glenn speak. "Hey, mate, you up for some football?"

Andreas tensed and slowly turned his head to stare over the back of the sofa.

Glenn came closer, and I could see him. He wasn't smiling or anything, but I could tell he was in a good mood. His eyes darkened when he spotted me, however. "Or never mind. Seems you're busy with your boyfriend."

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Andreas rose so quickly I didn't have time to pull my feet back. He almost dislodged me from the sofa, but I managed to stay on it by clutching at the side of it. "Do

you have any fucking idea what's happened?"

Glenn frowned. "Chill out, mate. What's wrong with you? I can't even make a bloody comment about him without you flying off the handle?"

I pushed myself up into a sitting position. I spotted Thomas in the kitchen doorway in the corner of my eye. *Good*, I managed to think, and then all hell broke loose.

Andreas jumped on Glenn, slammed him up against the wall, and though Glenn looked stunned for a moment he started fighting back.

"You have no right coming in here, after what you've done!" Andreas' fist hit Glenn's face, knocking him off his feet. Andreas dived for him and now they rolled on the floor, both getting punches in.

"I haven't got a bloody clue what you're on about!" Glenn yelled back. "Are you fucking mental?"

Christina had come downstairs too, and she and Thomas tried to separate them together.

"Get a hold of yourself!" Christina shouted as she pushed Andreas away.

Thomas held Glenn down, and he stopped fighting when it wasn't Andreas close to him anymore.

Andreas stopped, too, when he was faced with his sister, because I knew he wouldn't ever do anything to hurt Christina.

"You," Thomas pointed a steady finger at Andreas. "Go sit down. And you," he looked down at Glenn now, "are calming down." Glenn pushed Thomas away and got to his feet. While he did stand there glaring at Andreas, he didn't attack him again.

Christina pushed against Andreas' chest, since they'd both risen to their feet now, too. Andreas strode over to sit on the arm of the sofa, but he still wasn't calm. I wasn't sure if touching him right now would make matters worse. Besides, my hands trembled so badly I had to sit on them to try and calm down.

"What the hell is your problem?" Glenn asked Andreas, wiping at his split lip. "What've I done wrong now?"

"Fucking original of you to send you psycho brother on us," Andreas snapped.

"What?" Glenn looked honestly confused, and I could tell he had no idea what Marcus had done. "My brother? Marcus? What the fuck has he got to with anything?"

I scooted over to put a hand on Andreas' back. It still shook, but not as much as it had when the violence had broken out. "Andreas. He doesn't know," I whispered.

Andreas glanced down at me, but as he took in the state of my face, I could see it only made him angrier.

Glenn's eyes zeroed in on me now, too, and though he frowned first, his eyes slowly widened as it dawned on him that his brother had done *something*. "Marcus beat him up? I didn't—I had *nothing* to do with that."

"Beat him up?" Andreas laughed, but it wasn't a happy laugh. "He took a fucking iron bar to his head! Alex could've *died*!" He squeezed his hands into fists and I knew he wanted to hit something again, preferably Glenn. "All because you opened your big fucking mouth to him!"

"I—I didn't—" Glenn looked between me and Andreas, seemingly lost for words.

"You can fuck off," Andreas told him coldly.

Glenn stared at him for several long, tense moments, then he pushed Thomas, who'd been standing close to him in case they went at each other again, away. He strode into the hallway and the front door slammed shut after him.

The silence that fell after he was gone was heavy.

I kept my hand on Andreas' back, while he stared into his lap, clenching and unclenching his hands as he tried to calm down. I stroked his back soothingly, hoping I was of some comfort to him.

"Andreas," Christina spoke up after a while. "Wasn't that a bit harsh? I mean, he didn't *know*. You could see that on his entire face that he didn't know what had happened."

"It wasn't," he snapped. "He's never liked Alex. And because he mouthed off to Marcus, Marcus went after Alex. It's all his fucking fault! If he could've just acted like a grown up and accepted the fact that I was friends with Alex, without going off about it to his psychotic brother, this wouldn't have happened!"

I wasn't so sure about that. Marcus had seen us kissing, had heard Andreas ask me to be his boyfriend. He'd obviously recognised Andreas, and even if Glenn hadn't said anything to his brother, we wouldn't have got away from that encounter without something happening.

Andreas was shaken up, though, even more than I was, and I wasn't going to argue with him. He'd see it clearly eventually.

Christina didn't say anything else, just followed Thomas into the kitchen.

I pulled on Andreas' arm, and he turned to look at me. I motioned him to come to me and we lay down on the sofa, my back against his chest.

"Why are you so calm about this?" he asked against my hair.

"I don't know." I was rather calm, wasn't I? I was sure the reaction would come eventually, but right now I was just happy to stay with Andreas and his family. Happy that I didn't have to go back

to my own house. The tremble had been because of the sudden violence, so alike what went on at home. “Guess because I didn’t have to see it.”

“It was awful to see it happen and not be able to do something. I’m never taking that shortcut again. I don’t think I can.”

I patted his arms, which were both wrapped around me. “Yeah. I have to agree with you on that one.” Going back there, even in daylight… it would bring it back, for sure.

“Are you feeling all right? Not dizzy or nauseous or anything?”

“I’m fine.” I was. Maybe because I’d been given painkillers, but I was all nice and relaxed. I might have a concussion, but I wasn’t feeling any of the side effects at the moment. I was sure they’d come rolling in once the painkillers wore off, but until then, I wasn’t doing so badly. “I look like a mess, but I’m actually feeling rather good.”

“You do not look like a mess,” he argued.

He was full of shit, but it was nice to hear anyway.

Thirteen

Andreas was supposed to wake me up twice that first night, but I was the first one to react to the alarm both times. I had to lean over him to shut it off, and he grunted while I did so.

"Much help you are," I muttered, but I chuckled as I said it.

When his mobile stopped ringing, I burrowed back down into the duvet and into his arms, which wrapped around me even if he was still mostly asleep.

I rested all day Sunday, and when I started feeling nauseous and a bit unsteady, Thomas advised me to stay home from school on Monday. I took his advice, but by Tuesday, I was bored out of my mind and ready to go back.

I quickly found that I preferred to be ignored, because now people stared at me. I couldn't really blame them. With the way I looked, I would've probably stared as well, but it was uncomfortable when I was used to walking through the halls without garnering a single look from anyone.

Andreas wasn't speaking to Glenn, and we spent lunch break together in his empty classroom. It was too cold to stay outside and I didn't think I could handle the cafeteria just yet, so we sat at two desks in the back of the classroom.

It was actually quite nice, to just be the two of us. No Glenn to ignore me or throw me glowering looks, and no Peter and Sara snogging each other.

It was all well and good to be in love, but they took it to extreme measures sometimes with their cuddling. I wasn't opposed to cuddling at all—I just preferred not to do it in public. Andreas wasn't big on public displays of affection either, so it was all good.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?" Andreas hadn't agreed with me going back to school so quickly.

"Yes." I only had a small bandage on now, not the big one I was sent home with. It was a bit tender, but otherwise fine. The dizziness and nausea were gone too. "I can't sit at home, Andreas. If I did, I wouldn't be able to go outside again." I threw him a look that begged understanding. "It scares me. What happened. That people can do something like that, just because they don't agree. And talk about bad luck—why did we have to meet the worst homophobes ever at exactly *that* spot?"

Andreas shook his head sadly. "I don't know. But it sucks."

I reached under the desk to put my hand on his thigh. "I thought they were going to hurt you. At first, that's what I thought. Then when he turned to me and he raised his arm—" I could see it, in

my head. How he'd approached me, how he held something in his hand.

I shook my head, needing those thoughts to go away. I couldn't remember being hit, just that he'd advanced on me. After that I remembered flickering lights, then waking up the next day. "I was so sure he was going for you. I've never even met the bloke. I was so afraid for you. And then he goes for *me*?" I shook my head again, but this time, it was because I didn't understand.

"Because that would hurt me the most." Andreas leaned back and cracked his neck. "And it fucking *did* hurt. Ever since the night it happened, I've dreamt about it. Fucking nightmares." He ran a hand over his face as he squeezed his eyes shut.

Why aren't I as affected as he is? I was the one who *had* been bashed. Maybe the fact that I couldn't remember the actual hit, or what happened after, helped me. Or maybe I just subconsciously still wanted to die.

I didn't, though, not now, when I was with him. Life had been so much better since he'd helped me pick up my books. I knew I was still depressed, but not as much as I had been. And it was all because of him. Because he was who he was, so kind, so wonderful, accepting me for who I was.

"I'm glad it wasn't you." I clasped his thigh again, squeezing softly.

"Well, I'm not. I wish it had been me. That way, you wouldn't have got hurt."

Maybe it was worse being the bystander in such cases. Maybe I would react more if I'd been the one seeing him bashed?

The bell rang.

I sighed as I stood up. "Back to class, then." I had history next lesson, which I actually quite liked, despite the fact that the teacher was lazy and mostly just had us read silently from the textbook.

I heard a lot of people out in the hallway, and a person entered the classroom and made for a desk.

"Hey." Andreas grabbed my arm and I turned to face him. "See you after school." He bent down, but the moment I realised what he was about to do, I flinched back.

I stared at him with wide eyes, and he stared back. "I—I'm sorry." Shit. I turned around and exited the classroom before he could stop me again. I didn't even dare glance at the person that had already entered the room.

A simple kiss. The last time he'd kissed me out in public was that night. And look how that had ended.

I guess I'm reacting, after all.

I finished school before Andreas, and as he had football practice after, I had to go back home alone. Normally I wouldn't mind, but as I left the classroom after the last class, the bloke walking out ahead of me was suddenly tackled by someone else, and I flinched away from a lot more roughly than I had from Andreas earlier.

I could see they were just horsing around, but the initial fright paralysed me for several seconds.

They laughed at each other and yelled, which didn't exactly ease my sudden sense of panic. It was just like being back in my parents' house, listening to their screams. Just like seeing them go at each other, or like seeing Marcus lift his hand, ready to attack first Andreas, then turn to me when he changed his mind.

I stopped by my locker to stuff my books inside and then I hurried home as fast as possible. I didn't meet anyone as I went through the hallway and living room, and I was grateful for that.

When I'd closed the door to Andreas' bedroom behind me, I sank onto the bed and took several long, deep breaths.

Everything was fine; there was absolutely no need for me to get so worked up. They'd only been play-fighting; it hadn't been for real. The loud voices had *not* been my parents. I wasn't even living with them anymore. I shouldn't have reacted so strongly to it. I never had before.

I bowed my head and saw that I had started scratching at my arms. It was such a habit, I hadn't even noticed or felt it. One of the newer cuts started to bleed and I watched the blood trickle between the scars.

It was only four days since I'd been bashed. I'd spent one night in hospital, then three here. Three days of painkillers, nausea, and dizziness, and a throbbing head. It wasn't throbbing anymore, though. I was better. Andreas was doing worse than me.

Still, I scratched my arm and my hands shook while they did. If I'd had a razor handy, now would have been a time I would use it.

I closed my eyes and squeezed my hand into a fist so I would stop scratching myself. I took deep breaths and tried to ease the shaking. That didn't work, but I did calm down a little. I couldn't stay in Andreas' room, though, not alone.

I went back out into the hallway and over to Ben's door, which I knocked softly on. A muffled *come in* could be heard, and I opened the door to go inside. I'd never actually been in Ben's room before and it was quite different from Andreas'.

Andreas' room was neat, with a little clutter on his bedside table and desk, and everything was sparse, but masculine.

Ben's room… Well, for one, it was painted black, so it was

dark. His bed was a mess, and so were his desk and bedside tables and the coffee table. His room was big enough to have his own sofa and television, too.

Several guitars were scattered around the room, and a keyboard was standing against the wall. Most papers cluttered around seemed to be covered in notes. The musical kind of notes, anyway. I hadn't the faintest clue how to read them, but since Ben was studying music, I supposed he had to know.

"Hey."

Ben was sprawled on the sofa. He had a pen stuck between his lips and a notebook propped on his knee. "Hey, yourself."

I cocked my head in surprise at seeing him wear *glasses*. "I didn't know you wore glasses."

"Oh." He almost whipped them off. "Yeah, I only wear them in private. Forget you even saw it." He ruffled his hair, as if he was suddenly self-conscious about the way he looked. "So, what's up?"

"Nothing much." I shrugged. "What're you doing?"

"Trying to compose a song for the midterm exams, but it's not going well." He ripped off a page, crunched it together, and threw it away across the coffee table. "I love making music, but writing is a pain in the arse when I can't do it properly."

"What?" I walked closer to him.

"I've got dyslexia." He glanced up at me briefly, then back at the now-empty first page of the notebook. "Writing is a struggle. Every single letter is a bloody nightmare."

I hadn't known he had dyslexia, so it was a surprise to find that out.

"I hate studying, but I have to finish secondary school, you know, else I can't do shit with my life. Thing is that in secondary school, you have to have all these classes you won't ever need. It's fucked up. I'm in it to study music. What do I need with Economics or Norwegian or History or Maths for?"

"Might come in handy one day." I was good at all of those classes, but I knew not everyone liked studying as much as I did.

Ben snorted, not believing me for a second. "Hardly." He looked up at me again, and I finally had his full focus. "How was your day at school? Everything all right?"

I nodded and sank down on the arm of the sofa. "It was okay." I fiddled with a loose thread in the dark fabric. "I could've, perhaps, waited another day."

"What's wrong?" Ben tossed his notebook and pen on the table, then sat up properly to face me. "Did someone give you shit?"

"No. Nothing like that." I shook my head in denial. "I guess I'm not dealing as well as I thought I was. I thought I was all cool about it,

that it didn't really affect me, since I couldn't actually remember it, but… I react badly to violence, and play-fighting, and loud noises."

"You should talk to a professional. I can't give advice on what to do. I'm more fucked up than you are."

"How can you be?" I glanced up at him.

"Believe me, Alex, I *am* fucked up. And I *have* spoken to professionals. How do you think I managed to stop cutting? That, and a big dose of antidepressants."

"Are you still on pills?" Since he was sharing, I didn't feel too embarrassed to ask.

"Always." He smiled slightly. "When Thomas found out I cut myself, he took me straight to see someone. I didn't even have to wait for a referral, since he knew the bloke. He helped, a lot, and it honestly is thanks to him that I'm functioning well today."

"I've never seen anyone. My parents don't give a shit. You're lucky."

"I suppose." Ben stretched his arms up. "Thomas said your dad was at the hospital. Isn't that a good sign?"

I shrugged. "Not really. He fucked off the moment Thomas told him I was coming back here. Grateful not to have to deal with me, I'd say."

Ben groaned. "Some people just shouldn't be allowed to have kids."

I wondered where his parents were, but I didn't dare ask him that. I hadn't asked Andreas either, because I didn't want to use him to pry into Ben's life. Still, I couldn't deny I was curious as to what had led him to live with his uncle. He should be allowed to keep it to himself if he didn't want to talk about it. Everyone was entitled to privacy.

I might've had too much of it, though. I'd always kept everything inside. Maybe actually talking to someone, someone unrelated in all kinds of ways, would be of help? It certainly couldn't do any worse.

Fourteen

Ben and I migrated up to the living room later, after dinner, and we were watching a sitcom on the telly when Andreas came home.

He was still in his training gear when he came striding into the living room. He had grass strains on his back, and his shorts and pads were muddy. I looked up at him, prepared to ask teasingly if it had been a hard practice, when I saw the bruise on his cheek and the split lip.

"What happened?" I got up from the sofa a bit too quickly, and had to bend over and close my eyes until the sudden onset of dizziness disappeared.

"Had another row with Glenn."

"Andreas…" I straightened back up and walked over to him. I wiped a drop of blood away from his lip with my thumb. "You shouldn't fight with him. He's your best mate."

"He *was* my best mate." Andreas cracked his neck, causing me to take a step back, because I *hated* when he did that. He grinned at me. "Sorry."

"We saved you dinner." I smiled to show that his apology was accepted. "Do you want me to clean your lip for you?"

"Nah. I'll just clean it while I'm in the shower." He didn't kiss me, but he did squeeze my hand as he walked past. I wondered if he refrained from it because of the way I'd reacted after lunch break was over. "Hey, Alex." He turned around, came back to stand in front of me. A drop of blood trickled from his split lip and my gaze followed it. "I'm sorry for earlier, back in school. I shouldn't have done that. Not so soon after what happened."

"It's okay," I whispered.

"You sure about that?"

I nodded. He scrutinised me, but once he seemed confident I was speaking the truth, he did turn and leave. I sighed and went back down to the sofa.

"He's not going to let this thing with Glenn go," Ben said. "Thanks to Glenn, you were put in danger, and he can't forgive that."

"But Glenn's his best friend—"

"Doesn't matter. In Andreas' mind, he did something wrong, something that put *you* in danger. We might see it differently, but he's not exactly rational when it comes to you, now is he?"

"Is it my fault, then—?"

"That's not what I said *at all*." And with that, Ben turned back to the telly and turned the volume up.

I sighed and glanced towards the hallway where the door leading to the basement was situated. I hated the fact I'd flinched away from him, because it wasn't what I'd wanted at all. I wanted to be able to kiss him whenever I wanted, to show affection. And he obviously wanted that, too.

I got up with the intention of going down to the basement, but instead I ended up in the kitchen. Thomas sat at the table, glasses perched on his nose and what looked like bills spread out around him. He was doing calculations on a calculator and writing notes. I noticed that he was left-handed.

"Thomas?" I didn't want to disrupt him, but I had wandered into the kitchen for a reason, and I wanted to get it over with.

He looked up and in that moment, he looked so much like Ben had earlier, when he wore his glasses. They had the same black hair and blue eyes, and even their faces were shaped somewhat alike. He could've been Ben's father. If I hadn't known he was his uncle, that was what I would've guessed.

"What can I help you with, Alex?" His smile was soft, open, friendly. It didn't seem to bother him at all that I'd disrupted him.

"I was talking to Ben earlier." I scratched awkwardly at the side of my neck. "And he said that seeing someone professional helped him." I walked over to sink down on a kitchen chair. I held my arms protectively in front of my chest. "You've seen my arms. I don't think I'm as cool about being bashed as I liked to believe. I've got issues and I would—Being a doctor, could you refer me to someone?"

Thomas took off his glasses and put them down atop the book he'd been taking notes in. He clasped his hands in front of him and regarded me calmly. "Of course I can, Alex. But it might take a while. Like everything in this country, things go slow."

I nodded jerkily. "That's okay. As long as it'll happen eventually."

"With Ben, an acquaintance of mine was still in practice. He's not anymore, so I have to let it go through the normal channels. And it does take a while."

"What takes a while?" Andreas came striding into the kitchen in grey joggers and a T-shirt.

I tilted my head to look at him. Would he be okay with me going to therapy?

"Andreas, sit down." Thomas motioned to the chair next to mine.

Andreas cast him a surprised look, but he did as Thomas said. I got a quizzical look, but I bowed my head.

"You've both been through something that could've ended very tragically. It didn't, thankfully, but you've both still been

traumatised." Thomas looked from me to Andreas and back again. "I think you both would benefit from therapy."

"Therapy?" Andreas sounded like it was a word he'd never heard before in his life.

"Yes, therapy. After your dad died, you were in therapy. Didn't you think it helped?"

"Well, yeah, but—" Andreas dragged a hand through his wet hair. "Alex isn't dead." He threw me an apologetic look. "He's very much alive and well."

"And we're all thankful for that. But what you went through, it was still traumatic. You were beside yourself with worry that night, when I came to the hospital. You were scared out of your mind, afraid that you'd lose him. You didn't—but what you felt there, what you felt when you watched him be bashed… It needs to be processed, Andreas."

He didn't seem at all inclined to agree to therapy.

"Andreas. I asked Thomas to refer me to someone. I need it."

He turned to face me head-on. "You want to go to therapy?"

"Don't you think I need to?" I held my arms out from my chest. They were clothed, but he got the reference. "I think I need to. It's supposed to help, and I… I need help." I bit down at my bottom lip. "Earlier today, when you leant in and I— flinched…" I looked down, unable to meet his gaze. "I guess that was a result of what happened. I had a reaction. Towards you. Or… I don't know. Towards the person in that room. You never know what strangers might do when they see something they don't like. Last time you kissed me in public, I got an iron bar to the head."

"No one at school is going to hurt you." He sounded so sure, though how he could be was beyond me.

"I don't think anyone would. Not like Marcus did. But *he* did—it happened. And now we have to live with the aftermath." Both of us had to do that. He had nightmares, after all, so it affected him too. It wasn't just me, but both of us. "And for me, I feel that I need to see someone professional. I'm depressed. Have been for a very long time, even before the bashing. I cut myself. I need *help*." I wanted to kill myself. I *had* wanted to kill myself. Maybe some small part of me still did, only the bigger one was too infatuated with Andreas to let that happen.

"There's no shame in therapy. We all need it at points in our lives," Thomas said. "You've had it, Andreas. You know it can help."

"It wasn't exactly therapy. It was grief counselling." He rubbed at his eyes. "But okay. I guess therapy wouldn't be so bad. As long as I can stop dreaming about Alex being bashed every night, I'll be happy."

I reached out to put a hand on his shoulder. His hand came up to cover mine. “This’ll be good. Maybe I can actually function like a normal person.”

“You are normal,” he said fiercely.

I chuckled. “With the occasional cutting problem?”

“Alex…”

“It helped Ben.” I stared into his brown eyes. “He cut himself, exactly like I do. And it helped him.”

“He’s also on antidepressants.” All I could see in Andreas’ eyes were worry.

“Maybe that’s what I need, too.” His worry was sweet, and it gave me hope. He was my boyfriend, I was *his*, and we’d be fine, no matter what. Or so I hoped, anyway. “Before I met you, I wasn’t really functioning at all. You made it better, but it’s still there.”

Andreas nodded, eyes wet all of a sudden. “Whatever you need, Alex.”

Thomas sat back in his chair. “I’ll refer you both, then?”

Andreas nodded. “Yeah. Okay.” He tilted his head towards me. “I’m sorry about earlier. I shouldn’t have—After everything, I shouldn’t have done it.”

“You did nothing wrong.” He’d just wanted to kiss me. I was the one who’d reacted weirdly to it. It shouldn’t have been weird. Everyone else kissed in public all the time. It hadn’t even been in public—it had only been one person.

“Dinner’s in the fridge if you want to reheat it,” Thomas reminded Andreas. “You must be hungry after practice. And all the fighting.”

“Ah, yeah.” Andreas touched his lip, which had scabbed over, but was red and swollen. He stood up, found a plate in the fridge, and put it in the microwave.

I turned back to Thomas. “Thanks.”

He nodded. “Anytime, Alex. Anytime.”

I stared up at my childhood home with dread curling in my stomach. There weren’t any cars in the driveway, but they could just as easily have been parked inside the garage. Still, the house seemed dark, so I hoped it was empty.

I glanced to my side, making sure Andreas was with me. He stood there looking at the house, too, with his hands buried in his pockets.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“It’s a nice house.” He shrugged.

I supposed it was, for someone who didn’t know what it was

like to live there. “It gives me the creeps.”

Knowing he was there, that he was with me, made me start up the driveway. The door was locked, so I used the key to unlock it. This surely meant that they weren’t home, because they never used to lock the front door unless they went out.

“My room’s upstairs.” I didn’t bother taking my shoes off, and Andreas followed my lead. If Mum had a problem with it, she wasn’t there to voice it, and once I’d got all my stuff, I was out of there for good.

“What happens if they come home?” Andreas asked as we took the stairs two steps at a time. “You think they’ll do anything? Say anything?”

“Definitely say something, but I hope we’re long gone before they come back.” Which was why I was in a hurry. I didn’t want to stay there a second longer than I absolutely had to.

I had one suitcase and a few bags that all were used as gym bags. The bags I threw to Andreas, so he could get all my stuff off the desk, while I opened the suitcase on the floor in front of me and proceeded to dump all my clothes into it.

“You don’t really have much stuff.”

“I only have what I need.” When I had to work my arse off to be able to support myself, even while living at home, I didn’t have the luxury of buying things I didn’t need. “Just get it in the bags. You don’t have to be all that careful. I just want to get out of here.”

I hadn’t spoken to Dad since the hospital, and even then, we hadn’t had a proper conversation. Mum… I hadn’t spoken to her since she’d slapped me, scraping my cheek up with her nails. I didn’t want a repeat of that. I was out of here and headed back to a place where I was more welcome than I’d ever been with my own parents.

It was sad. Horrible, really. It shouldn’t have been like that. But it only served to show how some people shouldn’t ever be allowed to have children. Whereas others were kind to people who weren’t even in their family and gave me a place to live—gave me a proper family to be a part of.

The last pieces of clothing were dumped into the suitcase. I turned around, choked up from my own thoughts, to find Andreas emptying my nightstand. I wanted to go over and hug him, to tell him how grateful I was for him and his family and everything they’d done for me… but then he turned around, eyebrows raised, smile wry, and something square in his hand—

“Oh.” The lump in my throat evaporated to be replaced by redness creeping up my cheeks. “I’d forgot about those.”

His wry grin widened. “You want to keep them?”

I stared at him. The first time we’d slept together we hadn’t

used a condom—and we hadn't a single time since, either. I didn't think there was a possibility of the habit starting to stick now. "Not really, but…" I didn't want to leave them behind either. I might not have planned on having much, or anything, to do with my parents from now on, but to leave my room empty except for condoms… no. "Bring them."

Andreas reached back down into the drawer and came up with a handful of brightly coloured square packages. I'd been so good at being safe—before him.

"I suppose you're clean?" That wasn't a thought that had ever entered my mind before.

"Obviously. Else I wouldn't ever have shagged you without one of these." His lips fell into a serious expression as he gazed back at me.

I chewed my lower lip. "You've used condoms with the other people you've been with?"

"Not every time, no." He thought it over. "No, not really at all. A couple times, but other than that…" He shrugged. "Digging around for a condom—or having to ask for it—ruins the whole mood."

He was right about that. That was why we hadn't ever thought about using them. Or, well, for me it hadn't mattered or not that first time because I'd still planned on killing myself. What did an STD matter when I planned on being dead soon?

I got choked up again.

"Hey." He came over and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, drawing me in close to his hard, warm body. "I swear I'm clean. I've been tested and all, which is more than many people I know ever do."

"It's not that." I shook my head, then dropped my head forward to rest against his collarbone.

His strong arms wrapped around me, embracing me. His cheek rested against the top of my head. On the side where an iron bar hadn't recently been taken to it.

"I'm glad I'm not dead," I whispered.

"Me too. I was so scared."

His voice was just as low, but he took my words for the most obvious meaning to them; that I'd survived being bashed in the head.

What I'd actually meant was I was happy I hadn't taken the razor to my wrists vertically. If I had, yeah, I wouldn't have been bashed, but I wouldn't ever have known what this was like, either. To be with him, to be around his family, to be liked and to feel like I actually had a future ahead of me. I didn't know what it would hold, but for now it felt like it was within my grasp.

And it was all because of him. Because he'd talked to me and

kept me occupied all weekend.

I pulled away slowly. I'd much rather stay in the hug, but we were still in my parents' house and I was eager to get back to his. "Let's finish up and get out of here."

He didn't let go of me right away, instead ran his hands up to cup my face, then he leaned in further and pressed a kiss to my forehead. "It's going to be okay," he murmured.

I wasn't quite sure what he referred to. My concussed brain, the trauma the whole bashing had caused us both, my living situation… or everything balled into one. No matter what it was, I was inclined to believe him.

Things were already looking up, and now I didn't have to ever come back here… Well, how could I not feel a big ball of relief at *that*?

Fifteen

The days went by quickly now that I was living someplace where I didn't have to watch my every move every second of the day. For once I was comfortable, and it was so *nice*.

Going to the police on Wednesday was *not* nice, but I did get to tell them my side of the story, and I could only pray it would help. We didn't get any information about Marcus, but I hoped they weren't letting him walk around free, ready to attack someone else.

Andreas had another football practice on Thursday, and I was anxious if he'd get into another fight with Glenn. But when he came home he looked exactly like he had at school. He still had the bruise and split lip from Tuesday, but nothing new had happened to his face, so I was relieved.

I had the entire week off from work because of my concussion, and that included the weekend, even if it was my regular weekend to work. My boss had been very understanding when I handed him the doctor's note, saying I could take all the time I needed to get well again. I felt bad, because I'd thought he was an arse before, but when he'd suddenly shown such concern, my guilty conscience flared up.

On Friday, we finished school at the same time and headed back home together. It was weird that I was already thinking off Andreas' home as my home, but it was more a home to me than the house my parents lived in had ever been. It was because everyone who lived there *made* it a home.

We were all gathered around the coffee table, watching a Friday's night's worth of television programmes and eating tacos, when the doorbell rang. Thomas got up to get it when no one else made a move, and he shook his head good-naturedly.

He came back in with a more serious expression on his face. His gaze fell on me. "There's someone here to see you, Alex."

Dread settled in my gut and I put my half-eaten tortilla down. What did my parents want with me? "Which one of them is it?"

"It's your brother."

That surprised me. "Leo?" I didn't have another brother, though, so it could only be him.

"I can tell him to go away if you don't want to speak to him," Thomas offered.

"That's okay." I stood up from my position next to Andreas. He looked at me curiously. I squeezed his shoulder as I passed him and headed to the hallway. Thomas had closed the door, so I put on my shoes and a jacket before I opened it to step out.

Leo was bundled up in a thick jacket as well, and he had his

arms wrapped around himself to try to keep his warmth.

He turned around the moment I opened the door, and his eyes widened as he took in my face in the light from the outside lamp over the door. “Shit, Alex.” He stepped closer, reached out, then stopped and eventually dropped his hand back to his sides. “Dad told me where you were staying. What happened to your face? Did one of them do this to you?”

“Mum did this.” I touched the butterfly plasters. “But the rest of it wasn’t them. I was bashed in the head with an iron bar.” It was surprisingly easy to say it out loud.

“What?” I could tell it wasn’t really a question, that Leo was just shocked. “But— Why would anyone do that to you?”

I’d never come out to Leo. Should I tell him the truth or lie? I didn’t have one handy, so I reckoned I should tell the truth. Whereas I knew my parents wouldn’t react well to me being gay, I had no idea how Leo would take it. “Because I’m gay. And the bloke took issue with me and my boyfriend.”

Leo looked up at the house suddenly. “Is this where your boyfriend lives?”

I nodded quietly.

“Is he nice to you?” Leo’s gaze were back on me now, and I couldn’t detect any bad feelings in them. In fact, he seemed a bit concerned.

I nodded again. “Yeah, he is.”

“Was it the bloke who opened the door just now?”

“Wha— No, that was his uncle.” I bowed my head, blushing at the thought of Andreas’ uncle being my boyfriend. He was a young enough man, and handsome, but he was not my type. “Andreas is the same year as me, only we’re in different classes.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been back in a while,” Leo said then, surprising me. “You should’ve rung me when this happened. I would’ve been here for you. Mum and Dad didn’t even mention it when I stopped by the house. Dad just gave me the address to this place.”

I smiled bitterly. Some people simply shouldn’t be allowed to be parents, just as Ben had said, because they didn’t care about the children they produced. They weren’t ever going to change. Instead they’d had three children, whom they’d fucked up completely. Camilla hadn’t spoken to any of us as far as I knew after she left town, Leo rarely came back to visit, and I… Well, I was all kinds of fucked up, wasn’t I?

“Mum didn’t even visit me in the hospital. Dad did, for a while, but he quickly fucked off as well.”

Leo stepped forward and hugged me tightly. I was shocked,

unsure what to do, but I did eventually hug him back. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “I should’ve come home more often, just to see to you, but I can’t face them more than a minute at a time. I don’t even want to face them.”

“I know. I don’t want to either. That’s why I’m staying here.”

“If you break up, though…” Leo released me and stepped back, leaning against the railing. “You can come stay with me. I’d rather you come to me than go back to stay with them. They’ve ruined our childhood. They’ve ruined each other. They’re going to kill each other one day, and I don’t want you to be around them, Alex. If something happens, anything, come to me.”

I became emotional again. *What’s wrong with me?* One kind word, and I was ready to start bawling my eyes out. “I will,” I got out past the lump in my throat. “I definitely will.”

“Good.” Leo shuffled his feet. “Look, I’m in town for the entire weekend. Do you maybe want to meet up tomorrow? We could go for lunch or something. You can bring your boyfriend, too, if you want.”

“Would that be okay with you?” I glanced up at him, uncertain.

“Definitely. I want to meet him.”

That must mean Leo was okay with me being gay. Like, *really* okay with it. If he weren’t, he wouldn’t have wanted to meet Andreas, right? “I’ll ask him. I can ring you up tomorrow morning?”

“That would be great.” He moved forward like he was going to hug me again, but he changed his mind at the last minute and instead took a step down. It was just as well, because the whole situation felt a bit awkward now. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then?”

“Yeah.” I watched him walk away before I went back inside.

Andreas’ eyes were on me from the moment I appeared in the doorway, and all the way across the living room floor. “Are you all right?” he asked once I took my spot next to him again.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I smiled at him. “Leo’s okay. He wants to meet tomorrow, actually. You too, that is.”

Andreas was taken aback. “All right.”

“You’ll come meet him? He suggested lunch.” Leo and I were close growing up, while Camilla had always kept her distance. We’d grown apart, obviously, when he’d left town, but I was looking forward to meeting him tomorrow. Maybe I could actually have a civil relationship with one person in my family. That would be nice.

“Of course I will. Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Andreas smiled, and I couldn’t help but stare.

He was, by far, the kindest person I knew. Followed closely by his entire family. I had only known him for two months, but we had been sleeping together just as long.

I thought I might also be in love with him already.

Bringing my boyfriend to lunch with my brother was surprisingly nerve-wracking. Leo had seemed fine with it the night before, but I didn't know if he would be today. For that matter, I didn't know if he'd even like Andreas. What if he didn't?

We were early, so we found the table that was most secluded from everyone else. I twisted my fingers together as I continuously looked around.

"Nervous?"

"No." I put my hands down flat on the table. "Yeah. I am. I don't know why."

"Afraid he won't show?"

"No, I think he'll show. I'm afraid he won't like you."

Andreas looked surprised as he glanced at me. "Me? Well… I'm likeable, I suppose."

I chuckled. "You are very likeable." He was so easy to fall in love with. So kind, so handsome, perfect body, great at sex… Speaking of, we hadn't had it since the bashing. Hadn't even been on my mind, and probably not on his, either. It was nice just spending the evenings together without getting hot and heavy, but it would be a lie to say I didn't want it to happen again—and soon.

"Hey!"

I startled at the voice speaking up from next to me. I turned away from Andreas to find Leo smiling at me. "You came."

"Didn't you think I would?" He shrugged and his smile turned sheepish. "Of course I did." He shrugged out of his jacket and sat down in the chair opposite me. "Hey. Leo." He stretched his arm out to Andreas.

"Andreas."

They shook hands before sitting back down properly in their chairs.

Uncomfortable silence descended. I bit down on my lip. I had no idea what to say. My head was completely void of topics of conversation.

"So you go to school?" Andreas was the one to finally break the silence. "What're you studying?"

"I'm studying to become a social worker. I'm on my third year of my bachelor degree now, and want to take another year of courses at Masters level, which will hopefully be my last year of study."

"Social worker, huh?"

"Yeah." Leo's eyes flicked over to me and that was when I realised he did this because of our childhood. Because he didn't want

anyone else to go through what we had. “What about you, Alex? What are you going to do in the fall?”

“Don’t know.” I, in turn, glanced at Andreas. “I haven’t figured it out yet.”

“Have you?” Leo looked questioningly at Andreas, too.

“I’m going to be a policeman.” Andreas answered with absolute certainty. I wish I could’ve been so certain. “But first I reckon I have to do a year in the army.”

“Ah, yeah. I did my year too, after secondary school.”

The army. I’d got a letter to show up in the spring too, but I doubted they wanted me anywhere near them. Especially once I got to see a psychologist or if they saw my scars. Going to the army meant Andreas was going to be gone for an entire year. It wasn’t until next autumn, but still… We might not even be together by then.

That thought was depressing.

“Did you like it?”

“It was all right. You have to go through a lot of shit, but it was good for me. Learned a lot about myself, and I like to think I grew as a person.”

Andreas nodded. “Yeah, I can imagine. Where’d you go?”

“I was in the K-9 unit. Working with dogs was cool. I’ve always liked them.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s what I want to do!” Andreas grinned.

I glanced between them as they continued discussing the army. I needn’t have worried about them not liking each other. They were getting on quite peachy, whereas I was still tongue-tied and had nothing to contribute to the conversation. I’d never given the army a second thought. I knew I would never go there anyway, so there hadn’t been a point.

Food was ordered and delivered, and I ate in silence while they chatted. They got along great. I was happy, considering I did want to have a functioning relationship with my brother.

“Alex, have you been at home lately?”

I jerked in surprise at being addressed. I hadn’t realised their conversation had lulled. “Um, no. I haven’t. Or, well, I went back to get some of my stuff, but they weren’t at home.”

“So you haven’t spoken to them at all? After the bashing, I mean?”

“No.” I shook my head to emphasise it. “I’m not planning on it either. Last time I tried talking, she slapped me.” I felt my cheek and the still-plastered scrapes Mum had given me. Talking wasn’t something I wanted to do in her presence again. I’d had enough violence to last me a lifetime.

“Now that you’re not living there anymore, I don’t have to ever go back.” Leo leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his chest. “I know I didn’t come back often. I couldn’t stomach it. But the times I did come back, it was for you. Now, I don’t have to anymore. Now, they can ruin each other’s lives without us being caught in the crossfire.”

“Yeah.” I bit at my lip again. “I’m glad you’re here, Leo. You are the only family I’ve got.”

His eyes were sad when he looked at me. “Promise you’ll ring me whenever there is something? Seeing you all beat up, and hearing you got bashed, was horrible. If anything bad ever happens to you again, I want you to ring and tell me. Or have someone else do it, as long as I *know* what’s going on.”

I nodded jerkily. “I will. I promise.”

Andreas’ family was wonderful, and I truly did feel a part of it when I was there, but it felt good knowing I had someone from my own family here, too. Someone I wouldn’t lose, even if things with Andreas went south. I hoped they wouldn’t, but I could never have a guarantee, no matter how happy I was with him now.

I tilted my head and found that Andreas had been studying me while I’d talked with Leo. I hitched my lips up into a small smile—and he returned it. His eyes didn’t leave me for a second and though it made me uncomfortable to be scrutinised like that, it also made my stomach flutter in happiness.

What had I done to be so lucky to meet someone like him?

Sixteen

December

Christmas snuck up. I wasn't used to buying gifts for anyone, so realising that Christmas was right around the corner caught me by surprise.

I had to scramble to get all the gifts together. I had a lot of people to buy for this year, whereas all the years before, I hadn't even bothered. I'd worked since I was sixteen, in the supermarket stocking shelves, and I'd always volunteered to work more on the holidays. Not this year, though.

This year, I was spending Christmas with Andreas and his family. His grandmother had arrived from Spain to spend Christmas with them all, too. I was nervous about the entire thing, while Andreas didn't seem to have a second thought about it at all. He took everything so calmly, while I was slowly freaking out.

Early on Christmas Eve, I realised, when I sat in a T-shirt and wrapped up the last of the gifts I'd bought, that I hadn't actually cut since I'd been bashed a month before. I ran my hand up my arm, then switched to run it up the other one. All the old scabs were scarred over now, and though my skin would never be smooth, it was the finest it had been in years.

I'd been in a downward spiral the last couple of years. I'd cut myself since my early teens, but the last couple of years was when it had become really bad. Along with the deep, dark hole that had been depression, helplessness, and suicidal thoughts.

That hadn't lifted until I'd met Andreas, and I'd been happier the past three months than I ever had been. I wasn't fool enough to think it would last forever, this was the *new love* giving me a boost, but damn, did it feel good.

I glanced back and up at the lump on the bed that was Andreas. He was still soundly asleep. He was never up before seven unless we had to go to school, and even then, he had difficulties waking up. Unless there was sex to be had—then he'd be awake in seconds.

I smiled as I folded out the card and put pen to paper. It was simple, what I wrote, but it was from the heart. Once I'd finished writing it, I folded it again and put it in a white envelope, where I wrote only Andreas' first name on the front. The card was a lot more romantic than his gift, but Andreas wasn't really the romantic type, so I'd gone with buying something I knew he'd wanted, that he would appreciate and put to good use.

Once the gift was done, I snuck out of the room and upstairs. We'd all done the tree the day before and the floor underneath it was already filled with gifts. I added mine to the back of the tree so it wouldn't be one of the first gifts to be opened.

I went into the kitchen, emptied a glass of water, then padded back downstairs.

Andreas hadn't moved at all since I'd got out of bed and I smiled to myself at the sight of him stretched out on his back. His T-shirt stretched across his wide chest and the duvet lay bunched around his waist. There was a very noticeable bump in the crotch area, and I smiled wider as my eyes zeroed in on it.

I sat down on the bed and pulled the duvet down. He only wore his boxers to bed because, whereas I was always cold and preferred to sleep in pyjamas, he was always warm. His dick was half-hard and pressed against the fabric.

Now, wouldn't waking him up with a blowjob be a nice pre-gift for Christmas? I was usually the more submissive one in bed, while he took charge, but this… this I could definitely do. This was something I loved doing.

His head rolled on the pillow as I inched his boxers down his hips. I took his cock in my hand once it was free, stroked the foreskin down so I could get to the head, then took it in my mouth. I started licking and sucking, and he groaned above me as he bucked his hips.

He was waking up. I didn't feel the least bit sorry, because he was waking up to me sucking his cock, which must be the best wake-up ever. I'd never quite done this before, though. Usually I woke to his dick poking my arse, and we moved on from there to penetrative sex. Today was all about pleasing him.

His breathing changed from the deepness of sleep to the quickness of desire. I knew he was awake now, but I kept at what I was doing.

"Alex." One of his hands came down to cup the back of my neck. He hadn't touched my head much since the bashing, and especially not during sex. I didn't think it would matter if he did, but it was better to be careful. The place where I'd been hit was still a bit more tender than the rest of my skull.

I had, during the past three months, managed to get better at sucking him off. I managed to take more of him in my mouth now, but still not all of him, so my hand had to help. I went slow, sucked him properly. I loved the feel of him on my tongue, the plump, spongy head leaking pre-come onto my tongue. It was heaven.

He moved his hips in sync with my downward bobs. We had a nice rhythm going, and though it was slow, I worked him good and it didn't take him long to climax at all. I swallowed his come, or what I

could manage of what squirted out onto my tongue. Some trickled down his cock and into his pubes, but I tried my best to lick all of that up as well once I'd swallowed what was already in my mouth.

I moved up to kiss him when I was done. "Good morning."

"Mmm." He kissed me back. "What time is it?"

I had to lean away from him to check my mobile. "Just past eight."

"Bloody hell." He threw an arm over his eyes. "Eight o'clock on Christmas Eve. Why are you even up?"

"Couldn't sleep." I put my chin down on his collarbone. "I'm nervous and excited, and for the first time ever, I'm actually looking forward to Christmas Eve."

That got me his full attention, and he wrapped his arms around my shoulders. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know." I shrugged, a bit awkward in our current position, but I managed it. "What do people do on Christmas Eve?"

"Well, I usually sleep late. But the girls always get up early to watch the telly. They revert back into kids, really, and they eat sweets and watch cartoons until that Czech *Cinderella* film starts. Then they're really transfixed. Can't get a single word out of them for a couple of hours."

"That sounds nice." I'd never been able to curl up on Christmas morning and watch cartoons. If I'd ever been curled up anywhere, it was in my bed, too afraid to go out of my room in case one or both of my parents were up and about.

"All right. Come on." Andreas pushed us up into a sitting position. "Shower, then we'll go upstairs so we'll get a sofa to ourselves."

He gave me a quick blowjob in the shower, then we dried off and dressed in comfortable clothes. He was in joggers and a T-shirt, and I was in joggers and a hoodie. It was almost nine when we got upstairs, but Christina and Maria were already up and watching the telly.

We settled down on the other sofa. Andreas lay down and so I did too, resting against his chest. It was more intimate than we tended to be around his family, but it was Christmas morning and the whole setting already felt intimate. Christina and Maria didn't say a thing, just silently handed over their bowl of sweets.

And so the morning passed. Andreas dosed off, but I was wide awake through all the hours of cartoons and *Cinderella* and every other Christmas film the channels aired during Christmas morning and afternoon. Thomas came downstairs, closely followed by his mother, and even Ben came up eventually. He curled up next to Maria and Christina, while Thomas and his mum, Martina, started decking out

the breakfast table.

Andreas' grandmother was a small woman, a bit heavyset, but with a round, kind face. She didn't really speak much, to my knowledge, but when she did, her voice was very light and low, as if she didn't dare speak up too loud.

We all had breakfast together, and we cleaned up since they had made it. Then it was back to the telly while Martina started in on the dinner, which would take several hours. Thomas joined us in front of the television then, too, sitting down in the armchair because the rest of us had taken over both sofas.

Andreas had two other cousins, and they came over for dinner as well. They were brothers, which was quite obvious from their similar looks. They both had white-blond hair and pale blue eyes, but while Jo seemed completely comfortable around the family, Jørgen seemed distinctly uncomfortable. He said his quick goodbyes right after dinner and left, but Jo stayed. This was the cousin who was dating Christina.

Everyone acted normal, and they weren't intimate at all, which made me wonder if perhaps the grandmother didn't know.

Dinner was wonderful: perfectly cooked salted lamb. It was one of the traditional Christmas dinners, but one my parents had never bothered with. They couldn't stand each other, so Christmas had certainly never been on their agenda.

After dinner was consumed and the dishes washed, we all rested for a bit until it was time for dessert. Thomas had made risalamande and cherry sauce, and it was absolutely delicious.

And then, at around eight in the evening, they started in on all the gifts underneath the tree. They all went one by one, which was kind of nerve-wracking, especially as everyone's eyes were on Andreas as he got my gift. He opened the card, which I'd written only twelve hours earlier. I could see it in my mind exactly how it looked and exactly what I'd written.

Andreas,
Thank you for everything you've done for me.
It means more than words can ever express.
I love you.
Alex

It seemed kind of cheesy now, in retrospect, and I knew I blushed. The fact that everyone watched didn't make it better.

"Alex." Andreas wrapped his arm around my neck and pulled me in close. He kissed my temple. "I love you, too."

I swallowed, not believing those words had left him. When he

let go of my neck, I turned to look at him with wide eyes. He hadn't even opened the gift yet, and now he drew an oblong envelope out of his suit pocket and handed it to me. "This is for you. I hope it shows you just how much I do love you."

I opened the envelope with shaking fingers. It contained sheets of paper and for one moment I thought he'd written me a letter, but when I unfolded it, I saw it wasn't a letter at all. "Andreas." I turned to stare at him again. "This is too much!"

He shook his head. "It really isn't. Besides, I don't want to go anywhere without you. All of our tickets are booked already, and you're coming with." He motioned at his family.

I didn't even dare glance at them, just looked back down at the first paper. It was a receipt for a plane ticket. A plane ticket to *Rhodes*, for a week at the end of June.

"I'm most likely going to the army for a year, so I don't want to spend one of my last weeks at home away from you. Besides, you deserve to get away, to enjoy sun and heat and something new. Get away from all the shit back home."

Tears filled my eyes and they overflowed, trickling down my cheeks. I put the envelope on the table and buried my face in my hands.

"Hey…" Andreas' arm slid over my shoulder. "You're not supposed to cry."

"No one's ever done something like this for me before," I hiccupped. I was mortified, crying in front of his family, but I couldn't stop it. The tears kept on coming. "No one's ever cared enough to—"

"Come on." Andreas tugged on my arm and I followed him out of the living room. He brought me into the kitchen and backed me up against the fridge, where he gently pried my arms away from my face. "Look at me, Alex."

I slowly, and very hesitantly, lifted my head to do as he wanted. I must have looked a right mess, eyes red and face swollen, but he only smiled softly at me. "I care enough to do those things for you. I care about you *so much*, you have no idea."

If it was anything to how I felt about him, I did have some idea. I wetted my lips. "That day you befriended me…" I bowed my head, not able to look at him as I admitted to it. "I'd planned to kill myself that weekend."

"Yeah, I know."

"How could you know that?" I asked, voice shaking. "No one knew."

"Well, I didn't *know*, but I suspected it." He sighed. "I was too young to notice anything about Dad. But Christina told me, after he was gone, that she'd noticed him doing stuff right before, making sure

everything was in order. Then one day he was gone. She said she wished she could've seen those signals for what they were, and that if she had maybe she could've prevented it from happening. She regrets not seeing the signs, and I told myself I would look for those signals, that I wouldn't let anyone else do what my dad did."

"I still don't understand what this had to do with me."

"You cleaned out your locker, Alex. You carried all your books home with you. No one does that." He did run a hand through my hair then, but on the opposite side of where I'd been bashed. "So I walked over to you when that tosser knocked all those books out of your arms."

A feeling of dread settled in my stomach. "You're with me because of that? Because you realised what I had planned?"

"Alex, no." He grabbed my shoulders, squeezing tightly. "That's the reason I dared approach you, so in a sense, it is *why* I'm with you. But I'd been watching you since second year. Since the end of it. I didn't see you all summer, but once third year started, you were back in school and I kept watching you. I stopped by Glenn's classroom a lot, just to get a look at you. You were gorgeous, but you also seemed so sad. I wanted to make you smile, I wanted to hear you laugh, I wanted to feel your hair between my fingers, I wanted to feel your lips and your body pressed up against mine." He leaned down to press his cheek against mine. "But I didn't dare speak to you before that day. You seemed to be at the end of your rope, and seeing you carrying all those books… I knew I needed to do something, or else I might never see you again. And that thought— it scared me, even though I didn't even know you."

I leaned my head on his shoulder as I started crying *again*. He wrapped me up in his arms and just held me. He'd known, and still he'd come to talk to me. Knowing what I'd been planning on doing had given him courage to come talk to me when he hadn't dared do it before.

He was the only reason I was alive today. Because he'd talked to me that day, I was still here, and I was relatively happy. Sure, my parents still sucked, but I was living with him now, and I had his entire family around me at all times.

"Why didn't you dare come talk to me?" I asked once I'd managed to calm down some. "You're so outgoing and confident. You had nothing against showing me your interest that first day."

"Well, I don't know. You always seemed so serious. Like, you never smiled. I wasn't sure if you were angry at something or someone, or what. So I never went over to talk to you, because I was afraid you'd shut me down before I could even get a word across. But that day, I saw my opportunity, and I took it. Once I got you talking, it

was easy. My natural charm took over." He grinned at that. "I've never been nervous when it comes to talking to new people before. That only happened with you, Alex, and that's how I knew that you were special. You weren't just someone I wanted for a fun time; you were someone I wanted to have something more with. And that day, after spending the day with you, I knew it for absolute certain."

That was so unbelievably sweet. I had no idea what else to say but, "I love you, Andreas." Because I did. After only three months, I loved him so much.

He smiled at me and leaned down for a kiss. "I love you, too."

Seventeen

"Why won't you come out with us tonight?"

Peter's expression clearly told me he was finding Andreas' refusal to go out on New Year's Eve ridiculous.

"Why in the world would you think I'd want to go out with you? You're spending the night with Glenn. It'll just lead to trouble." Andreas pushed his chair away from the table, leaning on only the back feet.

"You and Glenn need to sort things out between you. This is bloody ridiculous! You've been mates forever, Andreas, longer than I've even known you. You can't let this get between you; it wasn't really his fault."

"Oh, really? Wasn't it?" Andreas' hackles rose instantly and I glanced nervously between them. I didn't want him to have a fall-out with Peter too, not over me or what had happened to me.

"Fine." Peter stepped back and threw his hands in the air. "Be like that." And he left.

"Andreas." I sat down across from him and reached out to take his hands in mine. I'd let the subject of Glenn lie for over a month now, and I couldn't anymore. Glenn was his best mate and I knew Andreas missed him, no matter what he said. Yes, he was angry at him, but Glenn had always been a part of his life. "Glenn shouldn't have mouthed off about me, but he couldn't have known what his brother would do. I saw it that day, that he had no idea Marcus even had done something. He made a mistake mentioning it to him, but it's not his fault it happened."

"You could've died, Alex. I can't just forget about that!"

"I'm not asking you to forget about it," I insisted. "I'm just asking you to put it behind you. Make up with Glenn. I don't care if he's hostile towards me, but he's your best friend and you should be on good terms with him."

Andreas stared at me hard. "Why are you sticking up for him? He's horrible towards you."

"I know. But that's life. You can't make everyone like you." I shrugged, because it was true. There would always be people I couldn't stand, and there'd be people who couldn't stand me. Glenn was one of them, and there was nothing I could do about that. "Let's go out tonight. Have fun with your mates. It's New Year's Eve. Everyone will be out partying tonight."

"Are you sure about this?"

"I am." I squeezed his hands. "I'm sure. Let's go out, let's drink a little, have a nice time with your mates, and let's just enjoy the

night. At twelve, we'll go outside and watch the fireworks. Doesn't that sound nice?"

I knew I had him. "It does."

And so he sent off a text to Peter, and we went downstairs to get ready. First, we had dinner with the family, since his grandmother was still there. She and Thomas and Christina had cooperated on the entire dinner, which consisted of turkey and all kinds of other things to choose from. It was, just like Christmas dinner, delicious.

All of us were there during dinner, except one person. "Where's your last cousin? The one who was here on Christmas?" I asked Andreas curiously.

"Jørgen isn't a big fan of being around the family," Andreas replied in a low voice. "He, well, a lot of shit has happened to him, and he's got trouble being around people in general, I think."

That sounded awful. I wondered what had happened to him, but I didn't want to pry. It wasn't my business anyway.

Once dinner was over, we headed out. The before-party was at Peter's place, which made me a lot more comfortable than if it had been Glenn's, like it had the day I'd first met Andreas.

There were a lot of people gathered inside Peter's house, and I wondered for a moment where his parents were during it all. Then I realised that if the place was packed, I wouldn't have to sit in awkward silence around Glenn, so it worked in my favour.

Whereas Andreas shook hands or did that hug-and-thump-the-back move that blokes did with most people we passed, I didn't know a single one of them. Until I spotted Ben, that was, and his best mate, Nikolai. Ben was dressed all in black, and kind of blended in in the darkened room, but Nik stood out like a rainbow on a sunny day. He was dressed in colours, and most of his vests, which he always wore under open hoodies or cardigans, always had something obscene written on them. Today's vest wasn't actually that bad, it only said YOUR BOYFRIEND'S MINE.

Andreas was drawn into chatting with a bloke who'd just greeted him, so I headed over to Ben and Nik.

"Hey, Alex," Nik grinned at me, looking me up and down. "You look smashing tonight."

"Thanks." I wasn't quite used to Nik and his flamboyant behaviour, but he did always have a nice word for everyone, which was flattering. I was wearing what I usually wore, though, jeans and a nice shirt, under my jacket. There wasn't anything extraordinary about it, but it was still nice to hear it from him.

"Have you got anything to drink?" Ben glanced down at my empty hands.

"Andreas brought a six-pack," I replied, glancing behind me to

look for him. He was chatting with Sarah now. “We’re sharing it.”

“Beer.” Nikolai grimaced.

“There’s nothing wrong with beer,” Ben chuckled.

I had to agree more with Nik than Ben on that one, as I still didn’t really care much for beer, but I didn’t want to bring anything else either. I could drink water, but that was kind of boring on New Year’s Eve. So beer it was. It usually wasn’t so bad after the first one, when I’d already got a little buzz.

“I much prefer vodka,” Nik proclaimed. “So that’s what I’m going to go get myself. Then it’s time to start pulling.”

“You pulled a bloke last night!” Ben exclaimed.

“And tonight I’m pulling another one.” Nik winked, waved, and disappeared in the crowd.

I stared at Ben, and he stared at me. He was the first to look away, which was surprising, because usually I was the one unable to hold eye-contact for long.

“There you are!” Andreas was at my side, and my attention was drawn to him.

I could see Ben sneaking away out of the corner of my eye.

“I think Ben’s interested in Nikolai,” I said without thinking. It wasn’t really my business, but I’d seen something in Ben’s eyes when we stared at each other, and I was ninety-nine percent *certain* I was right.

“What?” Andreas blinked. “Ben’s sleeping with Tarjei, Nik’s older brother. Has been for years. I don’t think Nik knows, though, so I probably shouldn’t be saying it.” He glanced around, as if he was afraid Nik was standing close to us.

My eyebrows rose. *Oh, boy*. It really wasn’t my business, though, so I pushed it all away.

Andreas handed me a beer. I opened it and took a long swallow.

Sarah came over to us, with Peter at her heels. “I’m so glad you decided to come.” Sarah smiled at me, then leaned up to kiss my cheek. She liked to do that, and though I wasn’t at all used to it and it made me uncomfortable, she did it anyway. I hoped it meant she liked me.

Peter clapped hands with Andreas and simply smiled at me. Peter was all right, but we didn’t have much in common, so we hardly spoke.

The hours passed. We drank our beer, and I was given a cup of vodka mixed with Sprite from Ben, who sometimes stuck to my side and other times flitted away to do god-knew-what.

“Come on, it’s almost midnight!” Andreas grabbed my shoulder and steered me towards the door. Almost everyone filtered outside to

either watch the fireworks or fire up themselves.

I was content to watch, but Peter waved Andreas over to his stash of fireworks.

"Boys and their dangerous toys." Sarah sighed at my side.

I glanced at her. "It's dangerous, all right." A lot of the people getting ready to fire up had been drinking quite a lot. Glenn was on Peter's other side and I could see Andreas tense, but nothing else happened. They fired up the fireworks together and it was beautiful. The sounds were deafening, for sure, but the end result was beautiful, colourful fireworks lighting up the sky.

Andreas stayed outside, talking to Glenn once it was over. I slipped back inside, because it was freezing cold and I needed to warm myself up.

I found Ben in the kitchen, mixing himself more to drink.

"Want more vodka?" he asked me, lifting the bottle for me to see.

"Yes, please." I stepped up to his side. "Where'd you get that bottle? We're not old enough to drink that stuff."

"Tarjei bought it for me. It serves to know someone who's older than me." He winked and mixed vodka and Sprite in another glass, too.

"You mean sleeping with them?" *Oops*. I must be a bit drunker than I'd thought, because I hadn't meant to blurt that out.

Ben glanced at me. "Yeah, exactly. But no one knows, and I would prefer to keep it like that. Well, no one knows except Yvonne." Yvonne was Christina's best friend. That was all I knew. Ben must've seen my confusion, because he elaborated. "She and Tarjei used to date."

My eyebrows rose. "Andreas said you'd been sleeping together for years."

Ben blinked. "Andreas knows?" He pursed his lips. "I suppose he must. We *do* share the basement. But yeah, I've been sleeping with Tarjei since I was sixteen. I lost my virginity to him." I frowned and Ben grinned. "Yes, we slept together when he was with Yvonne too, if that's why you're frowning so badly."

"That's cheating." I didn't like the thought of cheating.

Ben shrugged, unrepentant. "It's not my business. I was single. He was the one who couldn't stay away from me, even if he had a girlfriend putting out for him. I guess I'm just that irresistible." He frowned, though, like he didn't believe it.

I could tell he didn't. Ben might act all cool about most things, but he was vulnerable, as his cutting proved. And the tattoos covering those cuts served to prove it too. He was a lot like me, Ben. Maybe that was why we got along so well, because we had so much in

common. “So Tarjei’s bisexual, then? Or is it just for you?”

“Tarjei is…” He took a sip of his glass as he thought. “All-sexual. Tarjei sleeps with whoever’s willing. He’s not picky, and I’m definitely not the only bloke he’s banged, no. I went to Thailand with them last year, and he bucked a ladyboy or she-male or whatever they’re called.”

“Oh. Wow.” I didn’t know what to say. That wasn’t appealing to me in the least, but then I never had been and never would be interested in women’s parts. A hard chest was what I wanted, but I couldn’t begrudge someone for liking something else, either. What did bother me was how blasé Ben was about his lover fucking someone else, no matter who or what gender they were.

“Best of both worlds, he told us afterwards.” Ben laughed.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” I couldn’t drop the subject now that he had opened up about it. “That the bloke you’re sleeping with is sleeping with other people?” It would certainly bother me. The blokes I’d been with before… I hadn’t known them, and I hadn’t really cared as long as I got sex, but now—I wouldn’t have been okay with it if Andreas hooked up with someone else.

“Why would it? It’s not like we’re in love with each other.” Ben laughed again, but it was a bit more strained now. “Besides, he’s not the only one sleeping around.” He took his glass and patted me on the arm as he brushed past me. “You’re too much of a prude, Alex. Good thing for you that Andreas is, too.”

He left me there, and I sipped my own drink for a while before I left the kitchen to find Andreas. I found him in the living room, still with Peter and Glenn. I walked over, and he smiled at me.

“There you are.”

“I’ve been in the kitchen with Ben,” I told him, then glanced at Glenn and Peter. Glenn wasn’t looking at me, while Peter glanced at Glenn.

“Do you want to leave? I’m ready to head home.”

“Oh, yeah, okay.” I glanced at his mates again. He didn’t want to stay with them?

We gathered our jackets and then started walking home. Peter lived about a fifteen-minute walk away.

“Did you and Glenn make up?”

“I don’t know.” Andreas shrugged. “We talked, but we didn’t mention what happened. It was awkward, but… amicable, I guess.”

“Good.” I stepped closer to him. “I don’t want you to lose your best friend because of me.”

“Alex—“

“No, I mean it. He’s your best mate. You’re lucky to have such a good friend. You should treasure that. He made a mistake, he trusted

the wrong person, but he can't be blamed for it."

Andreas sighed. "It's going to take time. You have no idea how I felt that night. I didn't think you were going to make it."

I reached out to him and wrapped my arm around his waist. It was night, it was dark, and so there wasn't anyone around to see us. "I just don't want you to lose your best mate."

"I know." Andreas kissed my temple. "Maybe we'll get back to how we used to be, but for now… I don't know."

Eighteen

January

"The winter holiday's in three weeks." Peter sat down across from us in the cafeteria.

"Yeah?" Andreas raised his eyebrows questioningly. "So?"

"I think we should do what we did last winter holiday." Peter looked between us hopefully.

I had absolutely no idea what they'd been doing a year ago, so I wasn't sure why he looked at me in that way. I couldn't say either yes or no.

"Who's *we*?" And Andreas wasn't going to enlighten me either, it seemed.

"Me, Sarah, Glenn, hopefully you two." Peter spread his hand, indicating the both of us. "Come on. It'll be fun! We'll get the cabin all to ourselves this year too, because Mum and Dad want to take their holiday later this year." Peter grinned widely. "Just us up on the mountain, hitting the ski slopes every day and the after-skis at night."

Skiing? I'd never skied in my life. And since I'd never skied, I'd never taken part in the after-parties either, though I had heard they were immensely popular in places where skiing was a big thing. Like Oppdal.

Andreas' fingers drummed on the table. I could tell he was excited. *Oh, god*. Spending a week in a cabin with Glenn… it wasn't exactly something I would want to do. But he obviously wanted to go, and if I said no, I knew he wouldn't.

"You think that's going to work? The five of us in close quarters? Me and Glenn specifically?"

"You've been doing well since New Year's," Peter pointed out with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I guess."

They had. They hadn't had a single fight since, though they hadn't shared quite as much camaraderie as before, either. I still felt guilty about that, because it was all on my account. Maybe going away for the winter holiday would be good? Or it could backfire. I liked to think they would make up properly, though. Positivity and all that.

Andreas finally turned to me. "Do you want to go? We had a blast last year."

I nodded slowly. "Sounds… fun." I wasn't so sure, but at least it would be fun for him. "Could I maybe ask Leo if he wants to come? That way I could hang out with him while you're all going skiing."

"You don't ski?" Peter looked at me as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

I shook my head. "No."

"Does Leo have winter holiday at college?"

"Don't know. But I can ask." It would be a perfect opportunity to bond some more with my brother. I'd never heard of Leo skiing either, so hopefully he wouldn't want to join them, if he did want to come.

"It's cool if you want to bring someone. The cabin's big enough for it."

"How big is it?" I asked dubiously. Big enough for six of us?

"It's got four bedrooms, two bathrooms, and quite a big living room and kitchen." Peter grinned wickedly. "We don't have to share rooms, any of us."

Well, that was a relief. Sharing a room with either Glenn or Leo, when I was sharing a bed with my boyfriend… Not something I particularly wanted to do.

"So are you in?" Peter looked between us, all excited again. "Sarah and Glenn already said yes."

Andreas glanced at me briefly. "Yeah, we're in."

"Great, mate!" Peter and Andreas clapped hands.

I took my phone out to write a quick message to Leo. It was only three weeks away, so it was best to give him a head's up quickly. I didn't have to worry about getting time off work, because I'd already asked my boss for the winter holiday off. I'd wanted to spend the entire week with Andreas, since he didn't even have a job to go to.

"This'll be great." Andreas' hand came to rest on my thigh, squeezing softly. It was under the table, so Peter couldn't see, even though he was still sitting opposite us. "Last year was awesome. Snow and skis and all around great conditions. After-skis in the evening, where there's such a good environment. You meet a lot of people. Drink a lot."

I smiled a bit tightly. Didn't exactly sound like my kind of scene. I didn't ski, I didn't particularly like to drink or talk to strangers. We were different, Andreas and I. But that was the reason we were even together in the first place.

If he'd been like me, he never would've dared go over and talk to me that day. And if he hadn't… I would've been dead. I wouldn't have known what it was like to be with him, to live in a normal household, be around normal people.

I owed him so much. If he wanted to spend the winter holiday with me and his mates, and go skiing and partying, then of course I'd go with him. How could I not?

"Did they say yes?" Sarah appeared over Peter's shoulder. She

slid an arm around him as she sat down next to him.

"They did." Peter grinned at her. "Alex might bring his brother too."

Sarah's eyebrows rose. "Brother, huh? Is he fit?"

"Uh… I guess." I wasn't the right person to ask if my brother was good-looking. He was my brother, after all.

Andreas laughed. "He is. He looks like an older, more rugged version of Alex." He threw an arm around my neck and drew me close for a quick hug.

"So definitely your type then," Sarah teased.

Peter only rolled his eyes, clearly not wanting to talk about good-looking guys, but his lips were still split in a smile.

"Nah. I prefer this one." Andreas nudged me.

I threw him a wry mock glare, but inside I soared. Leo was more put-together than I could ever be, he knew what he wanted to do with his life… out of the two of us, he would be the more obvious choice for someone to fancy. But Andreas fancied me. Had for a long time.

We'd been together for four months now. It was the best four months of my *life*.

"So it's Oppdal next?"

I stiffened at hearing Glenn's voice from behind me.

He all but fell down on the seat next to Andreas. He didn't look at me, but he seemed otherwise in a good mood as he glanced around at his friends.

"Yep," Peter said. "All of us are going. It's going to be *mint*."

Since I was already watching Glenn, I caught the quick glance he threw my way. When he saw me watching though, he hurriedly turned his attention elsewhere.

My phone vibrated.

"Leo's in," I told Andreas, but the others heard it as well.

"Leo?" Glenn questioned.

"Alex's brother," Sarah clarified for him. "He's coming with too. And apparently he's *fit*." She waggled her eyebrows, which earned her another eye roll from Peter and a snort from Glenn.

Andreas only laughed, and even I chuckled.

With one notable exception, Andreas' friends were great. With Leo joining me, and hopefully getting to reconnect and get to know him better while we were away… I thought maybe this holiday wouldn't be so bad.

For once in my life, I actually looked forward to something.

Part Three

I’ve Lived For These Few Seconds

Nineteen

February

My new psychiatrist wanted to put me on antidepressants—and I was more than willing to try, to see if they could be of any help.

However, the list of side effects was gruesome.

"You don't have to, you know. Just because she recommended it doesn't mean you have to do it." Andreas' arm wrapped around my waist. "If you feel you manage fine without help, then skip it."

"I do… sometimes. Other times, not." I'd been doing fine mostly since I met him, but I didn't know what would happen in the future, so acclimating to antidepressants could be a good thing if things went to shit again. "Besides, it's not like all of this is going to happen to me." I waved the sheet in front of me. "The common side effects aren't so bad, and it's extremely rare that the worse side effects happen."

Still, it was frightening. Because what if I was the unlucky one who got the worst kind of side effects?

"No matter what you choose…" He nuzzled the back of my neck. *I'll be here for you*. The words hung in the air. He had *not* been advised to take antidepressants by his psychologist, but then, he was a more stable person than I'd ever been.

I didn't want the all-consuming feeling of wanting to die to come back. It was gone because of him, because he'd shown me kindness and comfort. And good sex. But it could come back. Depression… it came in cycles, or so my psychiatrist said, even when life was good.

I put the sheet of side effects and other important information down and squeezed one pill out of the pill tray. It wasn't that big, really. It lay alone and vulnerable in the middle of my palm.

Andreas' hands wrapped tighter.

I tipped my palm to my mouth so the pill fell on my tongue, then quickly grabbed the glass of water waiting to help me swallow it. Dry-swallowing pills wasn't a skill I'd ever acquired. The only pills I ever took, before now, were painkillers, anyway.

Andreas kissed the side of my neck, lips lingering against my skin.

"Can you drink on them?" he asked suddenly, like it had only occurred to him. It probably had. "Or are you staying sober on holiday?"

"I can drink. It's not recommended, but I can." I'd asked about that. Our upcoming winter holiday was nearing, and I hadn't wanted

to be the only one sober. As long as I didn't take it too far, the psychiatrist had assured me it would be okay. As long as it didn't happen all that often, which it didn't. I wasn't *that* fond of drinking.

"Are you looking forward to the holiday?" His lips were back on my neck, his breath ghosting over it as he spoke.

"Yeah. I am." I was. Nervous about it, obviously, what with being cooped up in a cabin with my brother and Andreas' mates for a whole week. With Glenn and all, who didn't like me. But yeah, getting away, doing something else, would be fun.

I wriggled until he got the hint and loosened his grip, then turned in his arms. I slid my hand over his face, thumb tapping lightly on his lower lip. His eyes darkened in response, and I knew what was on his mind before I even pressed closer.

I felt something hardening.

A chuckle burst free. "Again?"

"What can I say, I'm young. I recover quickly."

I removed my hand from his face and instead leaned in to kiss him. "Lucky for you, I do, too."

He grabbed me close and somehow we managed to get from the bathroom and back to his bedroom all pressed together. We fell in a heap onto his bed, which bounced a bit at the abrupt connection with both our weight to the mattress.

The antidepressants, along with the long list of side effects, were blown from my mind. Even later, when it came back, I didn't feel anything. But then again, it had only been the first dosage. There'd be many more to come.

The cabin wasn't exactly a cabin. It was more like a big flat, comprising the first floor of a building that housed several other flats like this one. The hallway led into a massive living room, with a big sofa and coffee table in the centre of it. To the left were armchairs and a big, flat-screen telly, and to the right, to the side of the hallway, was the open kitchen with a dining table.

I couldn't help but stare around in awe as I stepped out onto the linoleum floor. To the left, a hall led to three doors. Same on the right. That could only be the four bedrooms and two bathrooms.

"This is one big cabin."

I turned to look at Leo, who grinned slightly at Peter.

Peter himself chuckled. "Yeah. It's Mum and Dad's big dream."

We'd driven two cars. Andreas and I had driven up with Leo in his, while Peter, Sarah, and Glenn had driven up in hers. I had no idea how Leo would get along with Andreas' mates, and I was a bit worried about it. Peter seemed nice enough now, and Sarah was all smiles.

Glenn was the one I couldn't read, and his expression was completely closed off.

"We have to go shopping." Sarah put her bag down and looked around at us. "I say only a couple of us go, so we avoid being all up in each other's spaces." Everyone muttered agreement to that, but no one actually volunteered to go shopping. "Alex?" Sarah looked at me, green eyes friendly.

"Me?" I glanced around, nervous all of a sudden.

"Yeah, you." She seemed determined, and the others still kept their mouths shut. "Come on, let's go right away, so we can spend the evening relaxing."

"I'll take your bag." Andreas reached out to take the strap from my shoulder.

"Thanks." I wanted to touch him, but everyone else stood around us, so I refrained from it. Instead, I turned and followed Sarah outside again.

"They're all good lads, but they *hate* going shopping. Especially with me. Maybe because I actually make them buy something healthy? Can't live on frozen pizzas for a week, after all."

"Do you think it's okay to leave Leo with them? He doesn't know any of them." I chewed nervously on my lower lip as I looked up at the closed door.

"It's okay. He'll get to know them in a heartbeat."

I got into the car as Sarah started it and buckled myself up.

"Now that we, the significant others—or better halves, as I like to call us—are gone, they can horse around like blokes do. Leo will fit right in." She backed the car out of the space and started down the gravel road leading to the main road.

"I'm a bloke," I pointed out dryly.

She laughed.

I wasn't sure if I should be insulted or not.

"You are. But you're not the same kind of bloke they are. You're more mature, and you're always so very serious." The hand that had rested on the gear shift came over to pat my thigh. "I don't know your brother, but he might loosen up a bit around them now that you're not there. When he doesn't have you to lean on. And besides, I wanted to spend some time with you alone. We haven't ever spent time alone, have we?"

"No." I'd only ever been around Sarah when both Andreas and Peter had been there. Except that day I'd met her outside the school, when I'd just met Andreas, I didn't think we'd ever had a proper conversation.

We were down on the main road now. I had no idea how far it would be to a supermarket, but to my surprise, it seemed the town

centre was quite close to our cabin.

"You ever been here before?" Sarah asked.

"No. First time." I glanced out her side window, up at the snow-filled mountains and the ski elevator on the mountainside. When I turned my attention back front again, we were driving down into what could only be the town centre. A shopping centre lay on the left, a gas station at the right.

"We're going in here." Sarah took the left turn in the intersection and quickly found a free spot in the parking lot.

We headed inside.

"There's a few shops here, but all of them are kind of a part of the supermarket. The bookshop and the clothes shop and the perfume shop… it all belongs to the ground floor. There's a couple of other shops upstairs, with a cafeteria and a hairdresser, but that's about it." Sarah motioned with her hands as she explained. She got a trolley for us and led the way inside the shop.

"Is this the only place to shop here?"

"No. There's a centre a couple minutes further. It's bigger than this and has better shops, but I prefer to do the food shopping here, as it's bigger."

I nodded my understanding. We passed the bookshop, which was next to a clothing shop, and we walked through the perfume shop towards the entry to the supermarket proper. So far, it seemed crowded, but once we passed through to the supermarket portion, it was huge and very open.

"Vegetables." Sarah veered off to the right and I followed her silently. She put various salads in the trolley, as well as cucumber, carrots, bell peppers, and potatoes.

"Potatoes?" I couldn't help but comment. "You're making potato dinners this week?" Weren't they all here to ski? Who would be up for making proper dinners after being out skiing all day?

"At least one." She looked at me like I was mental. "I hardly ever eat junk food. I'm all about eating proper, healthy food. The rest of the lads hate it, but as long as they don't want to go shopping, this is what they get. Besides, it's good for them."

I smiled. She was extremely fit, which attested to a well-balanced diet and exercise. "You do any sports?"

"Handball. The lads do football, I'm all about handball." She smiled back as she pushed the cart over to get both milk and juice and sour cream. Two cartons of each. "What kind of food do you like, Alex? I'm thinking fish with the potatoes. I also thought we could have tacos tonight? That's both healthy and good and something that we can enjoy on a quiet night."

"Tacos sound good."

"Anything you want in particular?" We were in the fresh food section now.

"I like chicken." I usually ate what I got, but if I had to pick something as a favourite, it would have to be chicken.

"What kind of chicken? Regular chicken with rice and sauce? Tandoori? Tikka masala?" Sarah put chicken fillets in the trolley.

Wow, she was determined to make something I would really enjoy too. "Tandoori, I guess. Or Tikka masala. It's the same, really. Andreas likes beef." I tried to steer the topic away from myself.

"I know. They all do." Sarah rolled her eyes. "Every time we go out to eat, they order either beef or burgers. If we buy take-out, it's usually pizza. They're *so* easy."

I chuckled. She was right. Andreas ate everything he got served, but if he had to make food, or buy something, those three were pretty good choices to bet on him getting.

"What about Leo?"

My smile fell. "I— I don't know." I still didn't know my brother, after all. Like me, back when he'd lived at home, we'd eaten what we'd got. It wasn't like we'd had much of a choice. Nowadays, I didn't exactly know him much, so what kind of food he preferred… that was beyond my knowledge. I hoped we could make up for some lost time this week.

"That's okay." Sarah smiled brilliantly. "He's a lad. He's bound to like at least some of what we get."

We continued on and she added beef from the fresh section, fish and chips from the frozen section, and then we perused sauces and pastas and rice, and added whatever we liked or they liked to the trolley. We got bread and butter and ham and salami, as well as eggs and ketchup and bacon. Proper breakfasts and proper dinners all over.

Snacks came last, but we had to have that, too. According to Sarah, anyway. The bill was sky-high, my eyes nearly bugged out of their sockets when I heard the sum, but we were going to split it, all of us, so it wouldn't be so much in the end.

We put it all into plastic bags once we'd paid and headed back out to the car.

"I like you, Alex," Sarah said once she'd started the car. I suspected she'd waited so she could focus on the road, instead of looking at me. "I like you a lot."

"Thanks." It warmer, hearing that. "I like you too."

"You're good for Andreas. He used to be wilder, you know. Going out with the lads every weekend, getting smashed. But he's calmed down now. Calmed down the very day he met you."

What could I say to that? I hadn't known Andreas since before the day he first spoke to me, so I had no idea what he'd used to be

like.

"I'm glad." I was. I was glad that he wasn't out partying wildly every weekend. I would've never wanted to join in on it, and I wasn't sure how I would take it if he went out by himself every weekend.

I didn't think I'd like it.

Twenty

Andreas left with his friends to go skiing after breakfast the next morning, leaving Leo and I alone in the cabin. I hadn't spoken much with Leo since the car trip up, and even then I'd been dozing off for most of it.

"How are you doing?" Leo sat down next to me on the sofa.

"Good." I glanced up at him, then down at my fingers, which I nervously twined together. How come I was so nervous to be alone with my own brother? I shouldn't be. Leo and I used to be close, once.

"Been home lately?" I was pretty sure he felt as nervous and awkward as I did, because he didn't seem to be able to find a comfortable position to sit in.

"It's not my home anymore. But no, I haven't been there in a while. There's nothing there I need." Especially not my parents. I was finally getting myself back together after years of their abuse and neglect, as well as the bashing, and I wasn't going to expose myself to them any further.

"I like your boyfriend. His mates, too. They're cool."

I smiled. "Yeah. They are." Most of them, anyway. I still hadn't spoken a single word with Glenn. He hadn't to me either, so it wasn't like I was the one at fault. "You were okay last night, when Sarah and I went shopping?" He'd seemed okay when we got back, chatting and joking around with them all.

"Yeah. They're great. Four years younger than me, but they're a laugh to be around."

My eyebrows rose. "They are? Even Glenn?" He wasn't exactly much of a laugh whenever I was around.

"Yeah." Leo nodded enthusiastically. "He's nice."

"If you say so." I didn't believe it for a second. But then, Glenn didn't like me. Maybe he was friendlier towards Leo, who hadn't stolen his best friend and secret crush from him. "Don't you ski at all?" I changed the subject. I didn't want to keep talking about Glenn.

"I do. It's not my favourite thing in the world, but I enjoy it once in a while. I might join them a day or two. I have to rent gear, though, because I'm not so keen on it that I have my own. Don't you want to ski?"

I shook my head. "I'm not particularly fond of heights and I've seen those slalom slopes."

"How about we go for a walk? See what Oppdal has to offer."

"I don't think they have much to offer, to be honest." But a walk sounded good. Better than being stuck inside all day.

I went with them all to the after-ski dinner that night. Leo had wanted to go and so had Andreas, and I hadn't wanted to be left back at the cabin alone.

Besides, I felt like the biggest drag ever, since I didn't go skiing with them and didn't particularly want to go out partying.

So I went.

It wasn't so bad, really. I had to drink beer again, but after the first couple of cups, not even that tasted bad. I actually felt quite good. So did everyone else.

Peter and Sarah were all over each other, and it was nice to see them so obviously in love, even if the public displays of affection made me uncomfortable. But I guess they didn't have anything to worry about, being straight and all. Last time I'd shown public displays of affection to my boyfriend, I'd been bashed.

I glanced at Andreas. He sat in the chair besides me and he was laughing at something Glenn had yelled in his ear. Peter was also part of the conversation when he wasn't kissing Sarah, who was planted firmly on his lap.

I looked to the other side of me, but found that chair empty. Leo had gone to the toilet and he wasn't back yet. It had been a while since he'd left, too.

I finished the last of my beer and got up to go look for my brother. I knew Leo could handle himself, a lot better than I could handle myself, anyway, but I didn't want to lose him in the throng of people.

Maybe he'd hooked up with someone? The thought hit me as I walked into the toilet. There were three stalls, all but one taken. I went into that one and locked it behind me, then put the seat down and sank down on it.

I felt a bit like an outsider. I didn't like to party, while everyone else *did*.

What was wrong with me? I'd never liked it. But Andreas did, and so did Leo, apparently. I was the only one *not* interested. Maybe because I wasn't old enough to drink something I actually liked? If I had to buy alcohol, I could only buy beer. Or alcopops. Or wine. Two of them I didn't care for at all, and though alcopops were okay, there were only a few flavours I did like.

"Alex?"

Andreas. I stood up to open the stall-door. "I'm here."

His eyes, so warm and deep and brown, took me in. He crossed the floor and gently pushed me further into the stall, then entered himself and locked it behind him.

My mind took a filthy turn, thoughts of him fucking me over

the toilet. That would be hot, wouldn't it? And though people might hear, it wasn't like anyone would be able to see us.

But no, Andreas seemed worried when he turned back towards me.

I stood against one wall, and he came up in front of me. He cupped my face in his palms and stared into my eyes. "Are you okay? You've seemed a little down for a few days."

"It's fine." I reached up to grip his forearms. He wore a cardigan over his tight T-shirt. His thick jacket was probably left on his chair, as was mine. I could feel the strong muscles in his arms through the fabric. I wondered for a moment that if he gripped my forearms like I did his, if he could feel my scars through my shirt. He probably would. It wasn't a very thick shirt. "It's just sometimes—I don't know. Sometimes, I have these days where I just feel down. Today's one of them. I'm okay, though. It's nothing *wrong*."

His gaze searched mine. "You'll tell me if something is wrong?"

"Of course." My gaze dropped, not because I was lying, but because his lips drew my attention. And just like that, my dark mood was pushed to the back of my mind as my filthier thoughts came back. "Kiss me." I needed him to. Badly. I hadn't seen him all day, aside from at dinner, and we didn't ever touch when his mates were around.

He smiled and leaned in. His lips were warm, soft, and tasted faintly of beer. I didn't even mind the beer taste, because he was finally kissing me. I'd been longing for that all day—since the day before, actually—for some time alone with him.

I didn't know if being in the toilets counted as being alone, but we were alone in the stall, even if the other occupants of the room could hear us if we made too much noise.

Andreas caressed my face when he drew back.

My black mood came back with a vengeance, though his touch felt very nice.

"Do you think I'm dull?"

"What?" His eyes widened a fraction in surprise.

"Do you think I'm boring? I don't play sports, like you, I don't like to go drinking and partying. I don't have anything in common with your friends. I don't want to ski—"

"Stop that." He put his index finger to my lips. "I don't think you're boring. I think you're different. Than us, I mean. You have other interests. You like to read books, to watch films, you like to study, you like to have sex…" He pressed up against me as he trailed off on his last point. His groin pressed to mine and I didn't even try to suppress my gasp.

"I think that goes for most people." I slid my hands up his

biceps, over his broad shoulders, and down his sides until I reached his hips. “One thing we have in common, I guess.”

“No guessing about it.” Andreas nuzzled the side of my face. His stubble prickled, but I didn’t mind at all. I wish I could feel it on the rest of my body, but shagging in the toilet didn’t hold much interest now. I wanted a bed, a bed with him and me naked in it. “For me, partying and drinking is about being sociable with my mates. Maybe meeting new people, too. Before I met you, it was also about pulling. But I respect that you’re not a sociable person, that what you like best is to be alone or with me or your close friends. That’s totally acceptable. I love you for who you are. I don’t want you to change just because of me.”

“You don’t want me to be friends with your mates?” I slipped my fingers under his cardigan and T-shirt to run over the bare skin on his lower back.

“Of course I do. But I also know you won’t be best mates with them, since as you said, you don’t have anything in common. I’m fine with that. As long as my friends know you and you know them, and we can all spend time together once in a while, everything’s cool. It would’ve been worse if you didn’t get along with them at all, but they *do* like you. Sarah even wanted you to go shopping with her yesterday. Only you.”

I nodded. I understood what he said. But it wasn’t entirely true, was it? “Glenn and I don’t get along.” I had to point it out. I couldn’t not. “He can’t stand me.”

“Glenn’s an arse. And if he really didn’t like you, he wouldn’t even be here. If there’s someone he doesn’t like, he doesn’t even want to be in the same room as them. He was like that in the beginning, yeah, but he’s mellowed out now. I know he doesn’t speak to you or anything, but that’s because he’s a stubborn git and can’t admit that he was wrong.” Andreas rested his forehead against mine, rubbing our noses together.

I had Ben’s words firmly implanted in my mind, but I couldn’t very well tell Andreas that the general consensus was that Glenn fancied him. That would certainly cement Glenn’s eternal hatred of me, and though it didn’t look promising at all as of now, that still wasn’t something I was willing to risk.

Besides, if Glenn fancied Andreas… then that was his secret to keep, not mine to blurt out. If anything, his dislike of me was understandable. I was the bloke who had the one Glenn could never have.

If this was true, then Glenn couldn’t be feeling so good right about now. If I’d been in love with Andreas, but hadn’t been able to have him… that would suck.

“Want to go back out?” he asked, but he didn’t seem particularly interested in moving. He was still pressed up against me.

“Yeah.” I’d have him in bed soon, and nothing could stop us from having our way with each other. Doing it in the toilet… it was a hot thought, but I didn’t think it’d be so hot in reality. Better to wait for a proper bed.

He kissed me again, long and deep, before he stepped back.

A bloke who’d been waiting against the sink cast us a long look before going into the stall we’d left.

I hurried after Andreas out into the club proper, and we headed over to the bar to buy more beer. I was only tipsy, so I could still drink. That wouldn’t take away from what I had planned later at all, as long as I, or him for that matter, didn’t get too drunk.

Twenty-one

I went outside to get some fresh air.

The air inside the club was stifling, but nothing else could be expected of a full club. Andreas stayed inside, chatting with Peter and Leo, while Sarah, who had made some girl friends, was out on the dance floor.

I walked to the side of the building, where it was dark and not crowded. I breathed in deeply from the crisp, cold winter air. Snow piled high behind the building, but where I stood it'd been shuffled away, so I could lean against the building itself.

I took my phone up so I could check the time. It was nearing one, so there was still an hour until they closed the bars. Two until they closed the entire club. I hoped we wouldn't be there until three, though. I was already tired, and ready to get Andreas home in bed so we could have some intimate time together.

"Hey."

A hand clamped around my shoulder—and I cowered. I knew we shouldn't have gone out of that stall together when there were people in the toilet, that bloke had looked at me for a lot longer than what was necessary and now he was here to deal with the one of us who was smallest and couldn't—

"Hey, Alex."

The hand left my shoulder, but in the next instant, someone was in front of me, and hands gripped both of my shoulders.

I couldn't breathe. Why—Every time when it was obvious to the public that Andreas and I were a couple, something bad happened…

"Alex? *Hey*."

The hands on my shoulders shook me gently and the panic lifted in momentary surprise. I blinked up at whoever was in front of me, and when he tilted his head just so and the streetlight caught him, I saw that it wasn't the bloke from the toilet. It was Glenn.

I wasn't sure if that was cause for more panic or not, but I did calm down.

"You okay?" Glenn slowly withdrew his hands, as if he wasn't sure he should. He looked at me as if I was a scared animal he had to tame. I guess I must have been, going into a complete panic from his hand on my shoulder.

What if it had been Andreas? Would I have freaked out then, too?

"I'm fine." I could hear my voice shook though, and I bet he could as well. "You startled me." My hands trembled, too, for that

matter.

"I'm sorry." He took a step back, and now his face was in shadow again. I wondered if he could see me clearly, and if he did, what kind of expression I was wearing. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Really? I couldn't help but think it. Had he really not meant to do it, then?

"Look. Alex." He lifted one hand to scratch at the back of his neck, and he didn't seem to be able to stand still. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

"You already did."

"No, not for *now*. Sorry for everything before. I've been a real tosser towards you, and—well, I'm sorry about that."

I stared at him. Rather, at his dark shape in front of me, since I couldn't see him clearly.

"Marcus… I swear I didn't set him on you. I did mouth off to him, but I had no idea he'd do what he did. I swear, Alex. I didn't know." It was his voice that shook now, and instead of scratching at his neck, he constantly ran his fingers through his hair.

"I know. The day after, I could see that you didn't know. It came as a surprise to you." I could still picture the look on his face when he'd realised what had happened. I could still see him and Andreas, fighting each other.

"I'm not like my brother. I don't want to be like him." Glenn took a step forward, so I could see his face in the light from the street lamp again. "But I know I've acted shitty towards you, even after what Marcus did, and I'm sorry for that too."

Oh my god. "It's okay." Glenn was *apologising*. The same bloke Andreas had said, only a while ago, was too stubborn to admit he was wrong.

"It's not, really. I was a real arse towards you." He glanced up at me, then quickly away. "Why were you so scared just now?"

My hands started shaking again just by the thought. "Because—because I thought you were going to hurt me." I bowed my head, ashamed to admit it. "That day, with Marcus… Andreas and I kissed and they *saw*. They didn't like it and then—well. And earlier, we were in the toilet. Just talking, but we were in a stall together, and when we got out, this bloke looked at me, at us, real long and hard and I just thought—I thought you were him." I didn't know why I was admitting this to Glenn of all people, but the words kept tumbling out of my mouth. I was unable to stop them. "I pose the least threat, after all. I'm not all fit and bulked up, like you lads."

"Hey…" Glenn swallowed. I watched his Adam's apple bob; I didn't dare look further up. "Just because my brother's a bigoted arsehole doesn't mean that everyone is. Yeah, sure, maybe he looked

at you because he figured you were gay, being in a stall together like that and all, but most people don't care."

"I'm afraid of touching my boyfriend in public." There it was. Laid out, for *Glenn* to hear. This was something for my psychiatrist to hear, who I'd only had two sessions with, not Glenn. "I'm afraid it'll happen again."

"It won't. Marcus is mental. Most people don't care if you're gay or straight, as long as it's not their own personal business. People only care about themselves, and the freaks that do mind and are capable of what he did… well, they're usually locked up."

"Marcus isn't." Going to the police had served nothing. He was still out there.

"He will be." Glenn sounded certain of it, but I wasn't. If I'd died, he might've got ramifications, but I was alive and well. No permanent injury. Just a big bout of depression and anxiety, and that didn't count for shit.

I didn't answer. There wasn't anything to say.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry." Glenn shuffled uncomfortably again.

I nodded, still not knowing what to say.

Glenn swallowed so hard I was afraid something had stuck in his throat. "Andreas is lucky." With that, he buried his hands in his pocket and walked away, with one final glance at me.

I stared after him, unable to comprehend for a second what had just taken place. Glenn, apologising. Glenn, giving me a compliment? That was actually the most incomprehensive part of it all.

Once Glenn rounded the corner of the building and I couldn't see him anymore, I finally got myself in motion. I only managed to round the corner myself before Sarah was in front of me. She grinned up at me, slightly drunk and lopsided.

"I want to go home," she said, putting her index finger right in the middle of my chest.

"You want me to go home with you?" I frowned down at her, unsure what she wanted.

"No. I want you to convince your boyfriend to go home, and then mine will follow, too. As it is now, he doesn't want to leave his mates behind. Not even to go home with me." She blew out an exasperated breath. "If I'd been me—I mean, if I'd been him, I would've liked to go home with me, right? Especially knowing I put out." She jabbed her finger against my chest at the last two words.

Her words startled a laugh out of me. "How much have you had to drink?" Sure, Sarah and Peter were usually all over each other, but I didn't think she was the kind of girl to talk about her sex life out

loud. Especially not to other blokes. Maybe she did with her girlfriends.

"A bit too much."

"I can see that." I turned her around, but kept my hands on her shoulders as I steered her towards the entrance. "But I'm all for going home, so I'll help you."

She threw me a lewd look over her shoulder. "You want to put out too, huh?"

I both blushed and chuckled at that. I couldn't deny it, though, because that would have been a thorough lie.

Twenty-two

I heard footsteps padding towards me and I turned to find Andreas approaching, chest bare and clad in only his joggers. The sight stunned me for a moment, even if I had seen him naked not long ago.

"Why are you up?" I turned back around to fill the glass I'd been holding with water.

"Had a dream." Andreas came up behind me and slid his arms around my waist. "Why are you up?"

"Couldn't sleep." I shut off the tap and took a long swallow. "Water?" I offered the glass to him over my shoulder and he drank, too. "What were you dreaming about?" I'd thought he'd been exhausted, after a day in the slopes, the drinking, and then our actives in bed once we got back. I should've been fast asleep too, after the pounding he'd given me, but I couldn't stop thinking about earlier, about the way I'd panicked, and the incident that caused it all.

"It was a dream." He nuzzled my neck. "About that night."

Seemed it was keeping him awake, too. He had dreams about it infrequently. More often before than he did now, though.

I put the glass down on the counter and turned around in Andreas' arms, so I could face him. "I had a major freak out earlier." I told him what happened. "But thanks to Thomas, we've been referred to professionals, and two times might not be much, but I hope that, with time, we can both get over it. I want to get over it." Speaking of psychiatrists, I wasn't sure if my antidepressants worked at all yet. I was doing quite well lately, but I couldn't tell if it was because life was good, or if they had something to do with it.

Andreas stared at me the entire time I talked. He released me now and ran his hands up my arms. My arms were bare, as I'd only donned my T-shirt before going out to get something to eat. I'd had some snacks, got thirsty, and now here Andreas was. He didn't seem to mind encountering the scars, but then, he never had.

Maybe I should start to believe him when he said he didn't care about them.

"I want to get over it too. It's just not that easy. Obviously not for you, either."

"I know." I sighed. I slipped my index fingers into the waistband of his joggers, which were barely hanging on to his hips. His cock was outlined in them, more so than usual. "Are you naked under there?"

"Are you trying to distract me?" He pulled me in close to him.

"Both of us, actually." I didn't want to keep thinking about the

bashing. “Is it working?”

“What do you think?” He reached down to push my hips in against his and I could already feel his cock hardening.

“I think it is.” I cupped him with one hand, while the other travelled up his back, feeling the ridges of his spine. His balls were tight and he was still hardening up. So was I, for that matter. “Back to bed?”

“How about doing it right here?” He spun me around and pressed me up against the dining table. I jumped up on it, since it was more comfortable to sit than have the edge cutting into my bum. I spread my legs to accommodate Andreas between them.

“You want to do it here?” I looped my arms around his neck.

“Why not? No one else around.” He glanced around as if to prove it, then grinned at me. “We’ve never done it anywhere that isn’t my bed and the shower. And this bed here, earlier.”

“You’re mental.” But I couldn’t help smiling.

“I like to think of it as adventurous.”

“This isn’t our home.” It would feel weird to have sex on someone else’s property. Sure, the bed wasn’t ours either, but a bed was a bed, and there’d probably been other people having in sex in them, anyway.

Andreas’ eyes sparkled. “Are you saying that when we get our own home, we can fuck wherever we want to?”

“Of course. Because it’ll be *our* home. We can do whatever we want.” I leaned in to kiss him softly.

“I cannot wait till we get a place of our own.”

I bit my lip. “It’ll be a while, though, won’t it?”

“Next fall. Once I’m done with the army, we can move out. We can do whatever we want.”

“You want to go to the police academy.” It was a statement, but somehow it sounded like a question.

Andreas nodded. “In Oslo. Don’t you want to study? Oslo has the most to choose from. Whatever you want, basically.”

I shrugged. “I haven’t thought about what I want.” I had, but I still didn’t know what it was I wanted. “For so long, my life’s been all about staying out of my parents’ way. Of working and earning money to be able to move out. Then… then it was all about killing myself, for a while. And now… now I have something to live for, but I have no idea what I want to do.”

“You’ve got time to think about it.” He stroked my cheek lovingly.

“Deadline for applying to university is under two months away.” I bit my lip again. “I don’t want to go anywhere without you, and you’re going to the army for a year. I could stay back and work

for that year, earn some money, but—“

“But what?”

“Where am I going to stay? You’re leaving, so—“

“Alex, you’re staying. Thomas isn’t going to throw you out just because I leave. You can have my room all to yourself. And when I come home on perm, we’ll be together.”

“I don’t want to stay with your uncle indefinitely. I really appreciate him letting me stay now, and without even having to pay for myself, I *do*. I appreciate it so much and he’s been nothing but kind to me. But I want to provide for myself.” That was what I’d been working towards before the suicidal thoughts had emerged.

I’d been working every shift I could get to earn enough money to be able to move out. My shifts had dropped in numbers drastically since I met Andreas, and I didn’t regret that at all, because I wanted to spend my time with him, but now that he was going away… I needed to figure out what to do. School was going to be over soon and I wouldn’t have that to go to anymore.

“Can’t we talk about this another time? It’s our winter holiday and it’s the middle of the night. Let’s just enjoy it.” I toyed with the hair curling at the back of his neck. It was getting long; he would probably cut it soon, though I kind of liked it a little longer. There was more to grab on to.

He looked at me. “You’ll figure it out. It’ll come to you. Don’t stress out over it.”

“I don’t have much time.” Still, I was done with the conversation. I wanted to move on to more pleasurable things now. “Andreas. Let’s go to bed.”

“Whatever you want, Alex.” He stepped back, allowing me down from the table. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders once I started towards the bedroom, pressing up against my back. His cock poked against my lower back, ready to be put to good use.

I stripped the moment I was inside the door.

Andreas laughed at me as he closed it, but he, too, shucked his joggers rather quickly. His cock was hard and it pointed upwards.

I scrambled up on the bed. The lube was on the nightstand, discarded after our round earlier.

I quickly squirted some out onto my fingers, then reached back to apply it. I was stretched from before, so foreplay wasn’t necessary this time around. All I needed was his cock inside me, and I needed it *now*.

“Andreas?”

He got onto the bed behind me. One hand rested on my lower back, and the other guided himself in place. He thrust in quickly and I was pushed forward so fast that I nearly lost my balance.

I let my upper body drop to the bed—that was the position I preferred it in.

Andreas adjusted himself. His palms came down on my shoulders, pressing me down into the mattress as he continued to thrust hard, fast, and deep into me. This mattress was harder than Andreas', but that didn't mean I would forgo this for a second. Having his weight on me as he pushed inside me… It was one of the most erotic things I'd ever experienced. I loved it with a passion I couldn't explain.

Like always, especially in this position, I came too quickly. It built up from the moment his dick rubbed over my prostate the first time.

When he then slowed, and pulled out of me completely, I wasn't sure if it was a relief or not. I settled on it being a relief, because this meant it would last longer. Sometimes I hated that he could make me come so fast, though he did it so wonderfully every time.

"Lay down, love." He pressed my hips down and I did as he wanted without question. I stretched out on the bed on my stomach, and rested my forehead against my folded arms.

Andreas lay down atop me, cock back in place and sinking into me. He didn't go quickly now; instead he set a slow, lazy rhythm of his hips. His head nuzzled my shoulder and neck. "You're the bravest person I know."

"What?" What was he talking about?

"You are," he insisted. "What you've gone through with your parents, the bashing, just surviving all that. You're strong."

"I hardly think it's called being strong, not when you see my arms," I mumbled against the arms in question. We were rocking slightly, and as much as I loved being pounded into the bed, this was quite enjoyable too.

"I think it's the opposite. That your scars show just how much you've been through. They're your history." His arms came to rest around mine, so his entire body surrounded me on all fronts. He was bigger than me, and heavier, but all of it simply made me feel safe and loved.

"Why are you talking?" I had difficulty thinking with his cock inside me. Even if it was slow, my brain wouldn't function properly. How could it, when I had sex with my boyfriend? It would always be good, no matter how or where or when we did it.

"Because I have things to say." He kissed me at the point where neck met shoulder. His warm breath fanned over my skin, creating delicious goosebumps across my skin that made me feel amazing.

"You're strong, too." I wished he wouldn't talk when we were in the middle of sex, but it seemed I couldn't stop him. "You survived both of your parents' deaths *and* the bashing."

"I wasn't the one bashed," he muttered against my skin.

"No, but you were the one who saw it and who had to deal with it. I don't remember it. Not the bashing itself. Only him coming towards me, then next thing I know, I wake up in hospital. With my dad at my bedside." I frowned into my arms.

Andreas made one hard thrust, which caused a low, drawn-out moan to escape me. "I've had good help in my family." Andreas ran one hand over my scarred skin until he encountered my forehead, which rested against my folded hands. He stroked my hair away from my skin, running his hands through the coarse locks. "You've had no one. You've only had yourself and your cutting. But you survived."

"Thanks to you." If he hadn't spoken to me, I would've done it. I had no doubt about that. I'd been so far down in a deep, black hole —but he'd yanked me out of it when he hadn't only talked to me, but brought me home, invited me to a party, had sex with me not just once but several times… He'd never got tired of me. He wanted me around. And that, more than anything else, had pulled me back up on my feet. "It's all thanks to you."

"I'm not going to lie: I like hearing that." He kissed my cheek, then gave another hard thrust, and this time, he kept it going. All thoughts of my shitty life disappeared, replaced with the pure pleasure he always brought me when we were in bed together.

I stretched my arms out and he did too, over my bare skin until our fingers could tangle together. I clung to him, to his fingers, while he made such easy work of my body. My cock was trapped between my body and the mattress, and the rocking of Andreas fucking me, as well as his cock inside me, was more than enough to make me come.

I'd heard and read that many men found it difficult to come from anal penetration, but I'd never had that problem. I preferred coming from penetration; it was easiest for me, and so bloody *good*.

My body pulsed through my orgasm and I imagined I must have been squeezing Andreas tight. That was confirmed when low, guttural groans came from him. He came inside me, like he preferred to do, and I felt some of his semen trickle down to my balls as he continued to thrust.

Andreas dropped down to my side once he was done, and I moved over to curl up against his chest. There was a wet spot from my own come where I'd been lying, and I much preferred to be close to him anyway. "That was good." I ran my hand over the light smattering of blond hair on his chest.

“Mmmm.” He wasn’t very eloquent after an orgasm.

I smiled to myself and sat up only to pull the duvet over us.

I suppose coming from such a shitty background, my life could’ve only gone upwards after that. And because of him, as well as his family, it had. I couldn’t ever thank them enough for that, but I hoped they knew.

Twenty-three

"Hey, Alex."

I looked up from my book at Leo, who stood next to the armchairs, looking extremely timid. I put my thumb on the page I was on, then closed the book and put it down on my curled-up legs.

"Hey." What was wrong with him? He wouldn't look at me. "What is it?" Had I done something wrong? Had someone else done anything to him?

"Umm." Leo came closer and he glanced at me now, but he couldn't quite hold my gaze. "I saw you last night."

"What?" I frowned.

"You and Andreas, here in the kitchen. Everyone else was asleep."

Andreas and me in the kitchen. Of course. "I'm sorry. We didn't know you were there. We won't do that in front of you again."

"Do what?" He blinked at me.

"Kiss?" We were talking about two different things. But what in the world was he talking about, if not us kissing?

"What? Alex— I don't mind seeing you kiss your boyfriend. That's not at all what my problem is."

Well, okay, but we hadn't just been kissing, had we? "Okay, then… we won't do anything more than kiss in front of you." I could understand that seeing us be intimate would be disturbing, even for people who didn't mind seeing gay people together. I didn't particularly like the thought that he'd seen us like that, either.

"No, Alex." Leo shook his head. "That doesn't bother me. I'm glad that you have someone, that you're happy. What does bother me is I saw your arms."

My arms… I instantly looked down, but I wore a hoodie, so everything was nicely covered up. But I'd only donned a tee before going out to the kitchen last night. No one had been awake. It had only been me—and then Andreas.

"For how long?" Leo was in front of me now and he sank down on the sofa next to me. "How long have you done that to yourself?"

Now I was the one who couldn't look at him. "Years."

"Because of Mum and Dad?" He took my arm, the one that wasn't still marking the page in my book.

The motion surprised me for a second, but then I ripped my arm out of his grip. I cradled it against my chest and stared at him. "I don't like anyone seeing my arms."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to look at them. I just— You did that to yourself."

I didn't say anything, because it hadn't been a question. If he'd seen them, it was quite obvious that I'd done it to myself. I tossed my book to the side, not caring that I lost my place in it. Instead, I curled up and wrapped my arms around my knees.

"You've been hurting a lot." Another statement.

"I don't really cut anymore." That was the honest truth.

"When'd you stop?" Leo didn't seem to judge me. He seemed more curious and pained, than anything.

"Well, it got a lot better after I met Andreas." Was I going to tell him the truth? Would it be good for him to hear, or would it pain him more? "Andreas saved my life."

"The bashing?" He seemed surprised at the change of subject. It wasn't really a change at all; it was very much connected, but he couldn't know that yet.

"No. That first day we met… I'd planned to go home and kill myself that day."

That struck him. Hard. "Oh my god. Alex."

"Andreas knew it, or sensed it, or whatever. Knew that something was wrong. That gave him courage to finally talk to me. If he hadn't, well… he saved my life. Everything is thanks to him. I hadn't planned anything. All I knew was that I wanted to die. I had nothing to live for. And then he was there, giving me that something when I needed it the most."

"Shit." Leo ran his hands over his face.

"I'm okay now. Mostly." I bit down on my lower lip, uncertain of what to say. I didn't want Leo to worry about me, especially not about something that wasn't an option anymore. I didn't want to die—I had something to live for now. I had a good life, away from everything that had made me miserable.

Leo stared right ahead for several long moments. He'd folded his hands, and rested his chin atop them. "I shouldn't have left you there. I should've stayed. Or I should've come back every chance I got."

"I don't know if that would've been any easier," I admitted. "It's them, Leo. Being around them… it's so depressing. I hate the fighting. I hate *them*. Some say you love your parents no matter what, but I don't. I hate them so much. I'm better off without them. Living with Andreas… it's been the best months of my life."

"You don't seem very happy."

"Because I don't go around smiling all the time? I am, though. I am happy." I unwrapped my arms from around my knees and instead crossed my legs. It was a more comfortable position to be in. "I'm trying my best to quit, Leo. That's all I can give you. Can we drop this? I don't want to talk about it." Maybe I was bitter for him not

being there, but I didn't want to dwell on my previous feelings. What mattered was that everything was coming together nicely for me now.

Leo finally turned to face me. He looked at me for a long while. "I also overheard you talking about what you were going to do in the fall. I'm sorry, I hadn't meant to listen in on you, but when I was about to round the corner and saw your arms… I froze. I couldn't stop looking at them."

I wrapped my arms around my stomach, like I was afraid he'd stare at them now too. Not like he could, considering they were covered up, but it had been a movement I hadn't even given a thought to.

Leo's eyes flitted down. He'd seen my instinctive movement. "You know… there are year courses you can do. If you like them, you can apply for a bachelor's later on. At another university, even. Or you could use them as free modules. There's a lot to choose from at my school, for example."

I blinked. Year courses? That hadn't even entered my mind. All I knew was that I wanted to be with Andreas for the three years he would be going to the Police Academy, and it made the most sense for me to get a bachelor's in those three years as well.

"We could spend the year together, you know, when Andreas is in the army. If you took a year course. Or if you just want to work. We could get a flat together. It's my last year there, and I don't know what I want to do after, so…" He shrugged.

"That's…" I thought about it. "Actually a good idea." Why not? It would only be a year. And I'd actually achieve something academic in that year, instead of simply staying with Andreas' uncle and stocking shelves at the supermarket. "Is this something you thought about just now?" Maybe he wanted to keep an eye on me.

"I thought about it last night, when I got back in bed."

I unwrapped one arm from around myself and rubbed it over my other forearm. "Is it just because you saw my scars? Is that why you want us to live together? To keep track of me?"

"No, Alex. No." He shook his head before I'd even finished speaking. "I want us to live together because we're brothers. Because we've never been able to bond properly, coming from the home we did. Because I want to get to know you properly. And with your boyfriend leaving for a year… Why not?"

Why not, indeed.

"A year course is an excellent way of trying something out. If you like it, you can build on it, but if you don't, you can move on to something else afterwards, but still have that year as something you've done and finished."

"I'll think about it." It was a good idea. I wouldn't have to live

off of Thomas, and I could be closer to Leo, too. If I couldn't be with my boyfriend for the next year, I at least wanted to be close to my brother. He was the only family I had. Family that mattered, anyway.

"You will?" I could tell he was hopeful. "I want to get to know you better, Alex. When you asked me if I wanted to come here with you… That made me really happy."

"That's good." My chest was squeezing. "I was happy you wanted to come."

He smiled then, for the first time today. We hadn't spoken together at breakfast, but now that I thought about it, he hadn't spoken then at all. He'd only approached me now, after everyone had left for the slope.

"The cutting… It helped me. A lot." I decided to give him something more than I had earlier. "That pain dulled the other pain, dulled all my emotions, and— I think, if it hadn't been for that, I would've given up a long time ago. I know it isn't pretty, the scars, but they did help me through everything. I don't like showing them off, and I hate the way my arms look, but at the same time… I can't regret them."

"So, you're not suicidal?" He sucked his lower lip into his mouth nervously.

"No. I was, for a bit there, before Andreas first talked to me. I just didn't have anything to live for. All I did was study and work, and I didn't enjoy any of it. People at school either ignored me or called me names, and no one wanted to even sit next to me. Mum and Dad… they were getting worse. I didn't see any other option right then. There was nothing good in my life. And then he spoke to me, and he brought me home with him and we—" Blushing, I broke off. I'd been about to divulge some details I felt were a bit too private.

"Hooked up?" Leo suggested with a raise of his eyebrows.

"Well, yeah." I blushed deeper. While I'd had an active sex life for a while now, long before Andreas, it had never been something I'd ever talked about out loud. I hadn't had anyone to talk to, and the blokes I'd been with before Andreas hadn't been interested in anything but the fucking. Neither had I, for that matter. Sex had been sex. It was good—great, even, and for a little while, I'd been able to lose myself in something that did feel good. And it had been great. The intimacy, the closeness during the act… it never lasted, not before Andreas, but it was good at the time.

"I'm so grateful he talked to you that day. That you got yourself out from those kinds of thoughts. If the cutting helped, then I suppose it's a good thing, even if I was horrified when I saw what you'd done to yourself last night." His gaze rested on my face, not looking away once. "I guess people deal in different ways."

Sounded like there was a story behind that. “How’d you deal?”

“The most common way people deal with difficult things: alcohol.” Leo moved into a better position, resting his side and right arm against the back of the sofa and his other on his curled-up knee. “A lot of partying. But once I graduated from secondary, I knew I had to do something with my life. I didn’t want to end up as someone who didn’t do anything, who had to either work shitty jobs or rely on welfare to support myself. So I applied to schools and I left for the army.”

“Understandable.” It was. If I’d been Leo, I would’ve left, too. To do something with my life, to get away from the shit we’d grown up with. I would’ve done anything to get away—I almost did the worst thing of all. It had seemed so right then, but so wrong now.

If I’d done it, I never would’ve known what it was like to know Leo, to be loved by Andreas, to be a part of his entire family. I wouldn’t know what it was like to have friends. Yes, they were Andreas’ originally, but I felt I’d got quite close to Sarah, at least. Peter was always civil, and after last night, maybe even Glenn would be as well.

“I don’t know if it helps, but even if I hardly ever came home, I did think about you. It makes me sound like a tosser, I’m sure, but I did. I just couldn’t face coming back to them, seeing and hearing everything I’d ran from. I knew you were left, but I guess I’d hoped they’d calm down once it was only you there. I should’ve known they wouldn’t have done that.”

“Leo, I’m not angry at you. I’m not bitter. You did what you had to do. You couldn’t stay back to look after me. What would you have done? Work shitty jobs and let your chance at university get away from you? I wouldn’t have wanted that.” I shook my head. It was only after someone finished secondary, the same year, that they were guaranteed to get into higher education. If he’d skipped a year, or several, he might’ve not got in, depending on his grades. “You had your chance. You took it. And I’m happy for you that you did. You’re almost done with your education: that’s awesome.”

He blinked. I wasn’t sure if he was fighting tears or not, because he’d bowed his head. Still, I could tell he was emotional from the way his hand clenched and unclenched on his knee.

“You don’t feel like I abandoned you?”

“No.” I shook my head slowly. “You did come back, from time to time, and you called me. Camilla abandoned us both, because she hasn’t rang us once since she left. That’s abandonment.”

“You’re right.” Leo lifted his head to gaze out the window. It snowed lightly outside now. It must be good conditions for slalom. Not that I knew anything about it. “So many years and not a word. I

can understand her not wanting to get in touch with Mum and Dad, but us… we're her brothers."

"I never really knew Camilla." I was young when she left. I didn't think she'd been very fond of me before that either, at least not as far as I could remember. "I'm glad we're keeping in contact, though. You are all the family I've got left. We're all the family we both have left."

"That we are," Leo agreed—and we smiled at each other in understanding.

Twenty-four

After dinner was over and we'd done the dishes, we were all spread out on the sofa, drinking. I'd bought some Breezers earlier, so I wouldn't have to drink any more beer, and Glenn had produced a full bottle of vodka—which we all shared and mixed with Sprite.

"Let's play *Never Have I Ever*," Sarah spoke up, all kinds of excited. We were all getting buzzed.

"What's that?" I asked curiously. It must have been a drinking game of some sort, but I'd never had friends to do those with, so I didn't know any.

"You've never done that?" Sarah eyed me up and down. "It's awesome! You make a statement starting with *Never have I ever*, and if the statement is untrue, you drink. If it's true to you, then you don't drink. Very simple, but very fun!"

Andreas, Glenn, and Peter agreed with her. I glanced at Leo, who sat at my side. He shrugged with a small smile, which I took to mean he didn't mind playing it. I nodded to Sarah that I understood. It didn't sound very difficult.

"I'll start, and then we'll move clockwise." Sara pulled her feet up to curl them under herself. She wore a short dress, since they were all going out to the after-ski tonight as well. "Uh, let's start innocently. Never have I ever…" She drew the last word out as she thought about it. "… fainted."

No one drank.

Sarah sat at the other end of the sofa and she looked over at Leo now. "Your turn."

Leo thought for a second. "Never have I ever been in love with anyone in this room."

I had to drink on that one, and so did everyone else, to my surprise.

I eyed Glenn discreetly. Did that mean that Ben was right? Was Glenn in love with Andreas?

When Andreas jabbed me lightly with his elbow, I realised it was my turn. I stared at him, having no clue what to say. "Never have I ever… cheated on a test." Lame, but it would have to do. I didn't drink, as it was a true statement, but everyone else did.

Andreas grinned at me when he lowered his glass. "Never have I ever bought alcohol for a minor."

"What, not even to Maria?" Glenn stared at him, excepting Andreas to drink, but he didn't.

"No. I want to be a policeman; I can't go breaking the law." He turned that grin on Glenn now, who rolled his eyes and took a long

swallow of his drink.

I didn't drink. I didn't know any minors I could've ever bought alcohol for.

Glenn was up next. "Never have I ever seen my parents shag."

Peter groaned, but he took a swallow. "They're like newlyweds, I swear."

Sarah, too, had to drink from her wine.

"Never have I ever been naked in public," Peter said.

Glenn snorted a laugh, but he took a drink. "You know, mate, that's going to change in May when we're celebrating being graduates. We're going to do so much stupid shit for those seventeen days."

"Hey, I'll drink to that." Peter clinked his glass with Glenn's.

"Maybe I'll get in on that one, too." Sarah stroked Peter's upper arm. "Never have I ever had sex at school."

Glenn drank again, which didn't come as a shock, but Leo took a sip of his drink as well.

"Never have I ever had sex outside," Leo stated, and once again, Glenn drank. So did Peter and Sarah. It didn't come as a surprise, considering the way they were always all over each other. If anything, I was surprised they hadn't ever done anything at school.

"Never have I ever kissed a girl," I offered, to which all of them had to drink. I was actually quite proud of that. No matter how fucked up I was, I'd always been certain of my sexuality.

"That'll change later, when we do spin the bottle," Sarah promised with a wink.

I couldn't help the blush that rose at that.

Andreas put his hand on my thigh and stroked softly. I looked down at it, panicking for a moment as we were surrounded by other people, but when I glanced around, no one seemed to care.

Andreas was up next. "Never have I ever been sick on anyone." His drink stayed untouched, while both Glenn and Sarah had to drink.

Peter gave Sarah a look. "Yeah, I remember the time you did that."

"Shush." Sarah slapped his arm away, but he grabbed a hold of hers, and she settled down against him.

"Never have I ever been in a relationship." Glenn held his glass up as if to toast, while the rest of us—sans Leo—drank from ours.

Andreas' hand still stroked my thigh, and now I dared put my own down atop it, playing with his fingers.

"Never have I ever been caught by my parents when having sex."

"Liar!" Sarah stared at Peter.

"Your parents caught us. Not mine." Peter smirked at her.

Sarah turned thoughtful, then she nodded and settled back

down. A faint blush had appeared on her cheekbones, but she smiled as she took a drink. No one else did.

"Never have I ever had sex with someone I couldn't remember the name of the next day," Sarah quipped.

Both Andreas and Glenn drank, and I took a sip too. There'd been this bloke once… I couldn't even remember what he'd looked like. I'd been drunk.

"Never have I ever had sex in public." Leo now, and Glenn was the only one who drank.

He'd done quite a lot, Glenn. And everyone seemed to have decided that sex was the topic for now.

"Never have I ever had sex in a car," I said, to which everyone but me drank too.

"Never have I ever wanked in school." Andreas eyed Glenn, who threw his head back on a laugh before taking a long sip. Peter and Sarah laughed at him too, and both of their drinks stayed untouched.

I turned my head around to look at Leo.

He was looking at them all with a small smile. He must've sensed me looking at him, because his eyes suddenly met mine and his smile broadened. I smiled back, wide for once.

Even though the subjects were getting increasingly more private, I was having fun. And I actually, for once, felt like I belonged. I was a part of their group, and I'd never felt like it before. It was a good feeling, a very good one.

"Never have I ever done oral sex on a bloke." Glenn was the one eying Andreas now.

Andreas chuckled as he took a drink. I had to drink, too. His hand turned over on my thigh and he twined our fingers together. I squeezed his in return, telling him silently that I didn't mind. That I liked it. That I actually didn't mind showing this bit of affection in front of his friends.

"Never have I ever had anal sex," Peter continued on the same track as Glenn. He drank, though, so that statement was untrue to him.

Andreas rolled his eyes at him, but he took a drink as well. So did I, and to my surprise, the rest of them did too.

"Hah!" Glenn kicked out at Sarah, who kicked him back playfully. "You've let him in the backdoor!"

"Oh, shut up, arsehole! Who the fuck trusted you enough to let you up their arse? I never would've." Sarah took another drink of her wine as she waggled her eyebrows at Glenn.

Glenn only smirked at her, but he didn't comment. I knew one person he'd done anal with. Ben. Ben'd said they'd shagged, and there

was no reason to doubt it. Still, it didn't seem like his friends knew about it, and I definitely wasn't going to be the one to blab.

"I say we do spin the bottle." Sarah held up an empty Sprite bottle. "We all spin the bottle and whoever it points at, they have to kiss. Unless that someone's related to you. Then you can hug." She smiled at Leo and me.

"That's a bit unfair. You're the only girl." Peter nudged her side. "Odds are, I have to kiss the lads."

"Of course those are the odds. That's what makes it so much fun." Sarah grinned wickedly. "You lads get off on two girls kissing. Us girls, well, we get off on two blokes kissing. Fair is fair. I'll even start." She put the bottle down on the table, away from all of the alcohol, and spun it. It stopped with the tip pointing at Leo.

It was obvious Sarah was way past buzzed when she stood up to round the table. It looked like she might lose her balance, but she did make it over to Leo, and she bent down to kiss him without hesitation. She kissed him with more passion than he returned, but then she was still basically a stranger to him and her boyfriend was right across from us.

Sarah seemed rather smug when she pulled back. "There. That wasn't so bad, was it? Your turn." She went back to curl up on her spot.

Leo sat forward to spin the bottle. It pointed to Glenn. They stared at each other for a long second, then both moved towards each other to get it over with.

I turned to Andreas, only to find him already gazing at me. I smiled and squeezed his hand tighter.

Leo and Glenn sat back down, and Glenn spun the bottle next. When it stopped, it pointed at… me.

I stared at it, then slowly lifted my head to see Glenn's expression. Luck really wasn't with me. We might've perhaps got somewhere last night, but now, all that might be ruined. He'd apologised to me… and now we were expected to kiss. He *hated* me.

"You don't have to," Andreas said.

I glanced at him, expecting him to be talking to me, but he was turned towards Glenn. He, too, seemed scared all of a sudden, as if this could ruin everything. I was very afraid it could.

"Oh, come on." Glenn snorted. "It's just a kiss. Nobody's ever died from it."

Well, that was true. But kissing a bloke who'd previously seemed to hate my guts… Not the greatest idea.

But we did—we kissed. It was only a brief kiss, lips on lips. I hardly even registered it had happened before we'd both pulled away. His eyes were unreadable as they bore into me and I sat back down

without quite knowing what to feel.

Glenn made me uncomfortable: first, because I'd known he hated me and now… I had no idea where he stood, where I had him. Did he still hate me? Was he starting to accept me? I couldn't tell.

I spun the bottle, hoping it didn't point to Glenn, but to my pleasant surprise, it pointed to Andreas.

"Hell, yeah." Andreas was on me before I'd even managed to turn to him properly. I laughed as he pushed me against the back of the sofa, but it was soon broken as his lips covered mine. Seemed both of us were way past buzzed as well, because we never would've done this if we'd been sober. Still, it felt good to be able to be this open for once. To not have to worry about someone taking offence, about someone hurting him or me for it…

"Come out with us later," Andreas murmured against my lips once we broke our kiss. "I don't want you to stay back here on your own."

I hadn't planned on going out with them. I hadn't wanted to. But now… I was having fun. The alcohol was contributing to that, but that didn't detract from the fact that I was enjoying myself. With a group of people. One of which was my boyfriend.

"Yeah. Okay." I kissed him again for good measure.

"Come on, you're not supposed to kiss *twice*," Peter yelled. "Spin the bottle, mate. And you better not kiss me like that, if it comes to it."

"You wish." Andreas sat back up properly, and he gave Peter a shit-eating grin.

I should probably have felt embarrassed. But I didn't. That was also likely because of the alcohol.

Twenty-five

"I saw you last night."

I turned around, confused as to why some stranger was talking to me. It could only be me, as I was once again outside, at the side of the building where I could get some peace and quiet and fresh air.

"Excuse me?"

A man stood there, at the corner of the building. He was in shadow, so I couldn't see what he looked like, but I didn't recognise his stance or his voice.

"Last night. You came out of the stall with that other lad. It's not often you meet gay people up here."

He was local. I could tell from his dialect. "D-Do you have a problem with that?" I thought I remembered him. He must be the one who'd stared at me when Andreas and I exited the toilet stall the night before.

"No. It's just rare, that's all."

He was creeping me out. "What do you want?"

"Just talk. Told you, it's not often I meet gay people up here. We're a small town."

"How can you be so sure I'm gay?" What if he didn't want to just talk?

"You went into a stall with a lad and you were in there for quite some time. You came out together. I heard noises, too. Did you give him head? Did you let him bang you?"

Did I have *bottom* written across my forehead? Just because Andreas was physically bigger and more muscular than me, it didn't mean he was automatically the top in our sexual relationship. But I guessed stereotypes were at play here. Still, it didn't stop me from getting annoyed.

"I have to get back in." I made to walk past him, but he stepped to the side to block my way. When I tried to squeeze past him and the wall, he stepped back to block me again. "Let me go."

"Don't you want to talk to me? It was just a question."

He was mental. He had to be. "Please. My friends are waiting for me." They knew where I was. I'd told Andreas before I went outside. We might all be drunk, but he would miss me if I didn't come back.

"Just wait a minute." He put his hand to my chest and pushed me back. I stumbled, almost losing my balance. Darn alcohol. I shouldn't have kept drinking once we went downtown. I should've stuck to water. I was drunk and now I obviously couldn't keep myself on my feet properly.

I leant against the wall for support as I regarded his dark shape. I felt helpless again, like I had that night when one of Marcus' mates had held me in his iron grip, like when I'd thought Marcus would hurt Andreas, only for him to turn towards me.

"Hey, chill, mate." He held his hands up, palms out in the universal sign for peace.

My breath sped up. I was afraid and it showed, so much so that even he could see it, whoever he was.

"I have to go." I didn't want to stay there anymore. He freaked me out, and though the situations weren't nearly the same, I still flashed back to that night in the marina when I'd taken an iron bar to the head.

"I just wanted to talk." He stepped away, so he wasn't blocking my immediate path anymore. "Can I talk to you later?"

I didn't answer, just hightailed it from there. I almost ran into Andreas as I rounded the corner, and he stopped me from falling over by holding onto my shoulders.

"Hey." He chuckled. "Are you all right?" I was in the light now, so he could probably see on my face that I was spooked. His eyes searched mine.

"Y-Yeah. It's nothing." I motioned with my head to the entrance to the club. "Let's go back inside."

"What happened?" He took my hand in his as we made our way over to the door. "Don't tell me it's nothing. I can see there's something."

"It was just… I don't know. Really random. Freaky." I tried for a reassuring smile. I hoped I managed it. "But it's okay now."

"If you're sure." I could tell he didn't quite believe me. I wasn't sure I'd believed myself. The man had said he just wanted to talk, but he'd been so bloody creepy, anyway. That wasn't normal.

Still, thanks to more alcohol, I'd almost forgot about it an hour later.

"Do you want to come with me into a stall?"

I froze where I washed my hands, then slowly turned my head to the person leaning against the sink next to me. It was him. Now that I saw him in light, I remembered him from last night.

"No, thanks." What did he think I was? Some sort of slag who gave blowjobs to whoever propositioned?

"Why not?" He cocked his head as if it was truly puzzling to him.

Was there less with him? "Leave me alone."

His head stayed tilted to the side. He blinked at me.

He must have been really desperate to get laid. If he was such a creeper normally, no wonder he never found someone else who was

gay around here. “Look. I have a boyfriend. I don’t know you. I don’t want to know you. I don’t even know why you’ve singled me out. Just leave me alone.”

“But—“ He took a step forward. I took one back.

“He said leave him alone.” Andreas was at my side, having exited the stall next to the one I’d used. He looked quite intimidating as he glared at the young man. “Fuck off.”

He looked at Andreas, then glanced at me. “Just leave,” I told him quietly.

Another look at Andreas, then he turned and left. It was only me and Andreas in the toilets now.

I leaned against the sink as Andreas used the other one to wash his hands.

“That was weird. I have no idea why he even singled me out.” Besides last night, but he could’ve just as well have singled out Andreas.

“Because you’re irresistible.”

I snorted. “Hardly.”

“You are.” He dried his hands and threw the paper in the rubbish. Then he came to stand in front of me. “I find you very irresistible. And if I do, others are bound to do so as well.”

“Think rather highly of yourself, don’t you?” I joked. But I leaned into him. His arms wrapped around me and it instantly made me feel better to have him so close. “God, something so random.” A laugh bubbled up and suddenly I couldn’t stop laughing. “What was that, even?”

“He wanted you in one of those stalls to do who knows what.” Andreas looked at me, partly out of affection, partly wondering why I was laughing so hard. I could tell because I’d seen the first one often enough and the second one was rather obvious, with his slight frown and quizzical head-cock.

“He approached me outside too.” I had to dry some tears. “I don’t know what it was even about. It feels cruel laughing about it, but—it’s just so *random*.” I buried my face against the crook of his neck as I tried to quell the laughter and get myself under control. It wasn’t easy.

“You know what I think? That you’re drunk.” Andreas’ hands ran up and down my back, caressing me gently.

I thought so, too. “Yeah.”

“I think you need to get to bed.”

“Not quite that drunk yet.” I kissed him, only once and only briefly, and then we headed back out again.

Andreas had left his beer with Peter, who was at the table with Glenn and Leo. I veered off towards the bar. I saw Sarah on the end

and went to stand next to her.

"Hey, you." She smiled at me. Her eyes couldn't quite settle on me though, so it was obvious she was smashed. "You're a good kisser, Alex." She leaned against me. "You can't ever say you haven't kissed a girl now."

"No, I really can't." We'd done spin the bottle until everyone had kissed at least thrice. At the end, it had been more like making out than kissing, actually.

"I've always wanted to kiss a gay bloke."

That startled a laugh out of me. "Yeah, that's quite an achievement."

"I think it is." She stroked a wobbly hand over my chest. "You're cute. Andreas is lucky to have you. You fit together *so* well."

That warmed. "I'm the one who's lucky."

Her eyes did focus on me then, and she studied me quietly for several seconds. Her focus was only averted when the barman finally turned to us.

Sarah ordered another glass of wine, while I went for a Breezer. I didn't have count over how many I'd drunk tonight. Add to that the mixed-up vodka I'd got from Glenn back at the cabin, and I'd had quite a lot of alcohol.

Someone bumped into me when I turned to leave the bar area, which in turn led to me bumping into Sarah. I, at least, was wearing trainers, while she was balancing on high heels. I grabbed a hold of her to keep her from face planting.

"People are such arseholes," she muttered. It was hard to catch over the music, but as she was now pressed up against me, I did hear her. "Can't even look where they're going and be nice enough to even *apologise*."

I steered her over to our table, where she instantly dropped down on Peter's lap. I took my seat next to Andreas.

He grabbed my hand to twine our fingers together, and for once, I was relaxed when showing affection out in public. Because of the alcohol, probably, as it had been earlier back at the cabin.

It was nice all the same.

Twenty-six

I woke up sprawled over a sleeping Andreas. My mouth felt like sandpaper and my head throbbed. It seemed I was also naked. Or no, not quite—I still had my boxers on.

Drawing away from Andreas' back, I pushed myself up into a sitting position. The room spun and I had to think to remember what the heck was going on.

Drinking—and lots of it. An interesting game of *Never Have I Ever* and *Spin the Bottle*, which led to a lot of kisses…

I smelled of smoke and alcohol and *beer*. Had someone spilled beer on me? My clothes from last night were lying in a pile on the floor. I picked up the shirt and sniffed it. Yep, someone had definitely spilled beer on me.

I didn't bother going through my bag, so instead, I just took the whole thing with me. I looked left and right as I opened the door, making certain no one was around to see me. The entire flat was silent, so everyone must still be sleeping. I slipped into the bathroom door opposite and locked it after me.

Brushing my teeth came first, then I turned the shower on. I waited until the water warmed before I stepped inside. I was glad we were closest to the bathroom with the shower. The other had a bath, which I found to be rather awkward to shower in.

I had to jump back out to find my shampoo and soap in my bag, getting water everywhere, but then I was in under the warm stream again. I quickly shampooed my hair, making sure to scrub it clean of everything evidencing the night before. When that was done, I started soaping myself up.

My cock was half-hard and pointing straight ahead. I stared down at it as the stream beat down over my head, washing away the shampoo. I wrapped a soapy hand around it and stroked. It had been quite a while since I'd done anything with only myself. Years, in fact, back when I'd discovered what my dick was for. Before life had become harder, before I'd just wished to die.

Nowadays, Andreas always took care of me. If he touched my cock or not, I always came when he worked my body.

I watched intently as I stroked back up so that the head was covered by the foreskin, then revealed again as I moved my hand down. My cock was nothing to Andreas', but I wouldn't say it was that small either. Maybe slightly under average? Andreas was way over it. I'd only been with one bloke bigger than Andreas, but that had hurt *a lot*. Maybe because he'd been sloppy with the foreplay and the stretching, but still.

I dragged my free hand through my hair, messing it up to make sure all the shampoo was out. Then I braced the hand against the wall as I sped up the pace on my cock.

My eyes fell closed, and I rested my forehead against the back of my hand. As much as I loved anal and blowjobs, a wank was good sometimes, too. Like today. It didn't take me long to come at all, and once I finished emptying myself over my hand, I was left with a relaxing, cosy afterglow.

I stayed leaning up against the wall for a bit, just enjoying being properly relaxed for once. With my forehead resting against the back of my hand, it had me in very close contact with my forearm. I looked sideways at the red lines covering my skin.

I stepped back, under the spray again. I kept my head bowed, so the water mostly avoided my face, and I held both my arms out and up in front of me. There must be hundreds of those red lines going up both my arms. They were mostly on the underside of the forearm, but some were on the front as well. There were also many red scars going up my arm from the elbow to my biceps and shoulders, but they weren't as closely packed together as the forearms. It looked like I'd completely maimed myself.

No, that was wrong. I *had* maimed myself.

But Andreas had never once looked at my arms like they were something disgusting to him. I was ashamed of showing them, but like I'd told Leo, I couldn't regret what I'd done, because the cutting had kept me sane. It had been my rock in a world where I hadn't had anything else.

Now, Andreas was my rock. He didn't judge me, and he didn't find what I'd done to myself revolting. He just liked me for me.

"Hey, Alex? You in there?"

I startled out of my thoughts at the loud knock on the door.

"Yeah," I called back. I washed my hands and crotch area, then shut the shower off.

"Can I come in?" Andreas asked from the other side of the door. "I really need a shower, too."

I grabbed my towel from my bag, wrapped it around my waist, and went over to open the door. His gaze zeroed in on my chest the moment the door swung open, and it fell down to my crotch as he stepped inside.

He was only in his boxers too, like I'd been.

"I can't remember getting back here last night."

His eyes met mine. There was laughter in them. "You were kind of drunk."

"Someone spilled beer on me."

Now, he laughed outright. "Yeah. That was Glenn. He was

even drunker than you. I had to support you, you know, *and* undress you."

I didn't know why I blushed. He'd undressed me plenty of times. It was only that those times I could remember it, and it had mostly led to sex. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He leaned in to kiss my temple and then put his own stuff down on the toilet. "You were cute." He brushed his teeth first too, like I had done.

"Cute?" I wrinkled my nose. I went over to my bag to find something to wear. I didn't have any immediate plans for the day, so joggers, T-shirt, and a hoodie. "Are you going to the slopes today too?"

Andreas finished brushing his teeth before he answered. "No. My head is killing me."

"Yeah." Mine still throbbed too, though the orgasm I'd just had had dulled it some. "I've got painkillers." I held up the box to show him. "Want one?" I took one out for myself, and a second for him when he nodded.

He swallowed his dry, while I had to go over to the sink for some water. I'd never been able to swallow pills without the help of water. They'd stick to the roof of my mouth if I so much as tried.

He got in the shower while I dried myself and dressed. I only put on my T-shirt for now, since the bathroom was steaming. I sat down on the toilet, after putting his things on the top of my bag, then tried my best to dry my hair with the towel. It was getting too long; I should book a hairdresser appointment soon, so I could trim it.

I looked up at the shower, and though it was steamed, I could still see Andreas' profile through it. I could see his cock standing at proud attention, getting some needed love from his hand.

I couldn't stop staring. I'd never seen Andreas wank himself off before, unless it was during sex. He did prefer to come inside me, but sometimes he did like to shoot over my bum.

I'd just done the very same, yet this felt a hundred times more erotic. Watching my boyfriend wank himself off was definitely the hottest sight ever. "Need some help in there?"

"You want to come back in?" He chuckled. His hand kept on stroking his cock without pause.

"You could come out." I didn't particularly want to undress again. "Or you could finish, so we could go get breakfast. I don't think I can trust my stomach just yet." I felt a bit queasy. It was a miracle I hadn't been sick the night before, since I couldn't actually remember the last part of our night.

Andreas laughed out loud again. "Sucking my cock is such a chore?"

“You have no idea.” I smiled to myself as I hung my towel up to dry. I went over to the mirror, wiped away some of the steam, and then ran my hand through my hair. I never brushed my hair after a shower, just let it air dry as it pleased.

The shower shut off behind me. I heard Andreas get out, and I wiped some more steam away so I could watch him in the mirror. He grabbed his towel, wiped himself down quickly, and strode over to wrap himself around me. Butt-naked.

“You’re in a good mood today.” He kissed my neck.

“Last night was good.” I moved my hands behind me to run down his hips and over his tight bum. He was fit, my boyfriend. Tight all over. “Even if my head is working on killing me, I’m feeling rather good.”

“Mmm. You feel rather good too.” His fingers slipped under my tee to run over the bare skin on my stomach. He was still warm from the shower. His hair dripped on my shoulders, but I didn’t care at all that it soaked through the thin fabric. What mattered was that he was behind me, naked, with his now-flaccid cock pressed up against my bum. “You finished yourself off? That was quick.”

“Never need much time when I think about you.” He sucked on my skin and I tilted my neck to accommodate him. “You know, I can get it up again if you want—“

The door banged open and Glenn strode in. He saw us and froze. “Jesus Christ, haven’t you heard about locking the bloody door?”

“Like you haven’t seen this before.” Andreas took a step back, away from me. I wasn’t so sure that was the best thing to do, considering, but then Andreas was clueless about that particular detail to begin with.

Glenn averted his eyes. “Put some bloody clothes on, mate!”

Andreas snorted and went over to pull on new boxers and a pair of joggers. I watched him, because how could I not?

When my eyes went back to Glenn, I found his attention had been drawn towards something else entirely. My arms. Which were on full display in my tee.

Twenty-seven

Now I was the frozen one. I didn't know what to do. My hoodie was still in my bag, which was lying in front of Andreas. I couldn't cover my arms, because there were so many cuts that it was impossible to cover them all up.

Would he make comments again, like he had when he'd tried to discourage Andreas from seeing me? His words still rang loud and clear in my head, especially *now*, when he stared at me.

"We're done here, if you need the bathroom." Andreas lifted my bag up in one hand while he stuffed his own stuff into it.

Glenn startled out of whatever thoughts he'd fallen into. "Uh, yeah. Okay." He stepped aside so we could pass. His head was bowed, but he lifted it slightly when I made to pass him. Our gazes locked, until I was out in the hallway and we weren't faced with each other anymore.

"Don't wank off in the shower now," Andreas commented smugly.

"Ha. Ha." Glenn slammed the door in his face, which only served to make Andreas laugh.

"Someone else is in a good mood today, too." I raised my eyebrow at him.

He crowed me up against the wall. "I think Glenn likes you."

"Don't be mental. Best case, Glenn doesn't *mind* me. But I honestly think he loathes me."

"He doesn't." Andreas grinned. *Why's he grinning?* "He could've left the bathroom, you know, once he saw us. But he stayed—to stare at you."

"To stare at these." I held my arms up. "Because they're a mess and he's right to stare." And before my arms, he'd stared at Andreas' junk, which I'm sure was a better sight for him than the evidence of my cutting.

"Thing with Glenn is that he doesn't do anything he doesn't want to do."

I frowned in confusion.

"Like last night." Andreas said it like I was supposed to know what he was talking about. I didn't. "He kissed you, Alex. Because he wanted to. If he hadn't, he would've refused to do it. Glenn's the kind of person who doesn't give a shit enough to be nice about anything if it's not to his satisfaction. He doesn't like something, someone, he's vocal about it. Like he used to be. But he's not anymore. He likes you."

I wasn't sold on it. But he was, and I couldn't very well share

the reason I knew it couldn't be true. "If you say so." I pushed him away playfully, so I could enter our room. "Doesn't it bother you, though? If it's true, I mean?"

"Nah." He shrugged and deposited my bag on the bed. "Why should it? You're gorgeous."

"Not the jealous type?" I'd thought he would be. But then there'd never been a dilemma of anyone liking me before. He was the fit footballer, popular in school, and with the charm to pull it off. I was nobody.

"If I'd been, I would've gone all caveman last night when all the kissing started. I would've been growling and throwing you over my shoulder and carrying you to bed to claim you for myself." He smiled when he said it, obviously joking and amused by the whole thought.

So was I, for that matter. Amused, that was. "Glad you're not a caveman, then." Or… "But if you ever felt like throwing me over your shoulder and claiming me as yours…" Now I shrugged my shoulders. "You won't find me complaining."

He eyed me. I realised too late what he was thinking, and he'd slung me over one broad shoulder before I could even react.

"What are you doing?" I laughed, though.

He threw me down on the bed, then got on it, too, to straddle me. "Claiming you." He put all his weight on me, pushing me down into the mattress. He kissed me hard, passionately. He gripped my wrists and held them over my head, so I wasn't able to move. "Claiming you as mine."

Oh, boy. Even though I knew it was an act, it turned me on. He turned me on so bloody much—

"Knock, knock." Sarah's voice broke through my reverie.

We both turned our heads to look towards the doorway. Which was open, because Andreas hadn't closed the door behind him. Now both Sarah and Peter stood there. Peter with raised eyebrows, Sarah with a smirk.

"Aren't you two cute?"

I was suddenly painfully aware that Andreas still held my arms over my head, and that I was still in only a T-shirt. My arms were bare for them to see now, too.

Andreas did let my wrist go when he sat up, but he didn't get off me, so it wasn't like I had anywhere to hide them. I put my hands on his thighs, knowing that the upper side of the arms weren't as bad as the underside, which had been free for ogling up till now.

"So last night was a blast, right?" Sarah strolled into the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I can't say I actually remember all of it, particularly not the last part."

"Neither can Alex," Andreas chuckled, eyes on me.

"I think it would be difficult to decide which one of them was worse off." Peter came further into the room, as well.

"Glenn was worst off," Andreas pointed out.

"He's always worst off. Besides him, the two of them were on a shared runner-up." He pointed to me and Sarah.

"Well, what's a party without some memory loss, right?" Sarah quipped. "Or what?" She nudged my shoulder.

"Uh, yeah." I was surprised the sense of belonging I'd felt last night was still strong without consumption of alcohol. Like I was truly a part of their group now.

"We've decided to stay in today," Peter said. "Make today a quiet, chill day."

"Me too. My head's still throbbing after last night and it does get exhausting to spend every day up there." Andreas got off me then, standing up so he could face Peter properly.

I pushed myself up into a sitting position so I, at least, could face Sarah. She smiled at me. Her gaze didn't even flicker downwards. "I was going to set out breakfast for us all. Make it a big, shared event we can all enjoy together. Want to help me?"

She'd grabbed my hand before I'd even finished nodding. It startled me so much, I got out onto the floor with her. When she continued to pull me towards the door, I tried to protest. "I need my hoodie."

"Hoodie? It's too hot in here, you'll *die* with that on. Come on, no one cares."

That could only be a reference to my arms. I glanced down at them. The red cuts and scars stood out amongst the rest of my pale skin. How could she not care about it?

How could anyone *not* care?

We were all freshly-showered once we sat down for breakfast. I'd set the table and put all the stuff from the fridge out on it, while Sarah had both boiled and fried eggs, and fried bacon. The table was filled with food, and it looked rather cosy.

"So did we miss anything exciting last night?" Sarah asked no one in particular, grinning at me. We'd ended up next to each other at the table. Glenn was on my other side, and Andreas, Peter, and Leo were all on the opposite side of the table.

"Don't think so." Peter shrugged as he smeared butter over two pieces of bread.

"Yeah, you did," Andreas said. "Alex's stalker came back."

"What?" I blushed as I remembered the weird man that had

approached me not only once, but twice. “What did he want?”

“Don’t know. Probably wanted you to go to the toilets with him again.” Andreas was finding the situation entirely too funny.

“What?” Sarah’s head went from me to Andreas and back to me again. “I haven’t heard about this.”

“It was just a random bloke.” After he left the toilets the second time he approached me, why in the world would he come over a third time?

“A random bloke who seemed a wee bit obsessed.” Andreas touched my foot under the table with his, drawing my attention up to him.

“It was freaky. I don’t want to go out again. Who knows what he’s going to do if I meet him again?”

“Just let one of us know,” Glenn commented. “We’ll punch his face in.”

“Wha—No!” I stared at him. “He’s just some lonely bloke from around here. Yes, he’s a bit freaky, but he seemed harmless.” Almost, anyway. I could still remember how he’d pushed me back that first time when I’d been outside, behind the building. It hadn’t felt harmless then, but that could’ve easily just been my own terror.

Glenn raised his eyebrows challengingly. “I’d still punch the creep’s face in if he tried anything.”

I didn’t know what to say. That sounded a lot like Glenn was being protective. *Protective of me?*

I glanced over at Andreas to find him looking back at me. He raised one eyebrow as if to say *told you so*.

No. He was wrong. Glenn must have been protective because I was Andreas’ boyfriend. Because he was in love with Andreas, not *me*.

He couldn’t possibly have a thing for me.

Andreas’ foot touched mine under the table again. Rubbing up against mine, was more accurate. That brought my smile back. It didn’t matter what everyone else thought or felt, that random bloke or Glenn, because I was with Andreas and he *loved* me. He was there for me, making me feel a thousand times better than I would’ve felt if he hadn’t been in my life.

I didn’t even have words to describe how much he meant to me. Because of him—because of his friends too, them letting me into their group and all, but mostly because of him—I was happy.

This was an entirely new feeling I wasn’t used to. I hadn’t ever been happy before.

I was now.

It was so *good*.

And it was all thanks to him.

END BOOK ONE
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About the Author:

TT lives in Norway and writes about gay men living in Norway. She also occasionally write about gay men living in the UK, because she loves the UK.

The men she writes about tends to be a little broken, but broken only means you can be fixed. TT likes to write about darker subjects such as mental illnesses, and the effects of past abuse. Norway might be too cold for TT, but she also doesn't like summer, so she's learned to adapt. TT is happiest in front of her computer, creating emotional stories about men loving other men.

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Streets Apart

By H.J. Perry

CHAPTER ONE

The lamppost didn't jump out in front of me purely to make me look foolish on a Saturday afternoon. I'm sure of this because the lamppost had always been there. Not since the beginning of time but for longer than my family has lived on the street.

When I turned out of the driveway to walk the one hundred yards down the hill to my own home from the house where I had been working, I saw Joe walking toward me on the opposite side of the road. Self-consciously, I held my head up a little higher, stuck out my chest and felt my biceps flex. Flex, they were practically screaming. I was carrying what must be the world's heaviest toolbox in one hand, but I didn't want Joe to see me struggle.

He saw me too, couldn't pretend not to. We lived in the quietest, dead-end, private street. There were no footpaths along either side and very few cars parked up against the verges because all the homes had extensive driveways.

Parking on the street overnight was prohibited; my family were too familiar with the ire stirred among the local residents when plumbers, painters or builders left their vans in blatant contravention of the unenforceable night-time rule. With all my family working in construction the neighbors accused us; as far as they were concerned, it was bound to be our friends or us behind the offensive commercial vehicle.

Joe and I exchanged nods that pass for a greeting when you're twenty years old. Neither of us looked away. Our eyes locked together as we approached each other and remained fixed after we passed. I continued to gaze over my shoulder, and he did the same as we battled it out, in an eye to eye showdown. I had his attention.

His route was free of obstacles, and mine wasn't.

Staggering backward like an unbalanced Jack Sparrow after walking into an inanimate piece of street furniture turned out to be an effective way of getting more of Joe's attention. Not a method I would ever have contrived, no matter how much thought I gave to the issue. I certainly did give over a fair proportion of my daydream time to precisely that question. How could I break down the wall of silence that had built up between us?

I looked foolish. Confirmed by the way Joe held his stomach, bent over double, as if he couldn't decide whether to put his spare

hand over his mouth to stifle his giggles or just point at me, without mercy. One of those times when three hands would have come in useful.

A quick glance around to check no one else had enjoyed my exhibition. We were alone on the very quiet street on which we lived, his parent's house opposite mine. Thankfully, he didn't keep walking but crossed over to chat.

"What was that?" He sputtered, struggling to get the words out and at this point I'd given up, placed the tool box down and joined in the laughter.

Another minute or two must have passed with neither of us able to speak. "I think I've got a stitch," I said.

"My face hurts." His palms were against his cheeks attempting to flatten them out. With his face squashed between his hands, his lips pouting like a fish, he looked hilarious, and we both lost control in raucous laughter. Every time I thought we were calming down we'd look at each other and set off again.

We were never the closest of best mates. Not BFFs. Our families lived across the street from each other; we were the same age, and both liked playing computer games when we were younger. That was the sum total of what we had in common. Yet I was inexplicably drawn to my old friend, the boy who lived opposite me, and it had become impossible to speak to him. Rekindling our connection could make all this humiliation worthwhile.

"Are you on your way home?" He focused on the tool box.

"Yes, I've been working at the top of this road. That's why I didn't take the van."

"Lucky for the van, it didn't get involved in that." He was waving his finger, pointing to me and to the post. And we were off again, giggling like children.

Our paths hadn't crossed in two years, but I wanted them to. I often saw Joe but always with a pane of glass between us. Either from inside a vehicle driving to or from my house or through my bedroom window as I watched him from across the street. I tried not to be weird about it, but I had a massive crush on him. A crush bigger than the house he lived in with his parents, so massive it was heavier than my tool box.

He had reached that house, and if I'd been watching where I was going instead of looking over my shoulder at him, I'd never have collided with the post. Mind you, he was also looking over his shoulder at me.

"Now you know, that's what happens when you check out a guy's ass. You need to be a bit more careful." Joe ran a hand through his in-need-of-a-hair-cut blond locks.

What the fuck, was he flirting with me? If he were a girl, I'd think he was.

"You were looking at me!" My cheeks were burning. He must have seen me glowing red like a traffic light. How could I deny it?

"What do you expect? Prancing along like a peacock!" he said.

"What are you talking about; I'm just walking home."

"I forgot you are a construction worker now." Suddenly, his left hand was on my upper arm, and it felt nothing like when anyone else touched me. Heat, electrical sparks and sheer bloody magic danced across the surface of my skin.

"What are you getting at; I was not prancing."

"No, maybe that's not the right word." He took his hand away, and I swear my skin protested, it wanted to leave my body and chase after Joe. "You just look manly and hot. Not how I remember you."

Oh my god. How much did I want Joe to find me hot? Hot! That's what he said.

Hearing him say it, it freaked me out, a lot. I'd not heard a guy talk like that about another dude, not in real life. I hung out with guys all the time. And they never said a man looked hot. What was the matter with Joe, talking like that?

I couldn't afford to think about how his looks set my heart beating faster because he was right there in front of me, laughing at me. He looked hot too, so damned cute but I couldn't think about it right then.

We'd known each other since childhood, but we didn't hang out together like we used to, and that coincided with my awareness of his bloody attractiveness. It was only everything about him. From his slightly wild and wavy blond hair, his clear sky blue eyes and delicate features, small nose, small ears, and full lips. Hell, I never noticed those things on other people. Did other people have ears, nose, eyes, lips? Fuck knows.

So now came my turn to deliver one of the speeches I'd rehearsed over the last two years but, of course, I didn't. I was rescued from any temptation to speak by Joe.

"How is the plumbing apprenticeship going? You managing to get the job done without falling in any baths or tripping over toilets?"

"Ha, ha. It's good. I'm transforming the water works across the county. Making sure the joys of water on tap and flushing toilets are in every home."

"When you put it like that it sounds exciting." Joe's blue eyes twinkled. He hadn't changed a bit. "The apprenticeship worked out okay then?"

"Yeah, I'm still employed by the same bloke, a friend of my dad. He's okay. He has been a good teacher outside of college."

"How often do you go to college?"

"One day a week now. What about university, is it going well for you?" I asked.

"Spending most of my time reading and watching films. Are you kidding? It's a course made for me." Both of his hands fell to his hips as he spoke and he shifted his stance. He looked like a fashion model, super cool and comfortable. It wasn't the clothes, jeans, blue sweater and white trainers, but how he wore them.

I forced myself to concentrate on conversation rather than his appearance. "Where you off to, anywhere interesting?" I asked.

"Promise not to laugh?" he replied.

"That would be hardly fair, would it? If you're about to do something cringe worthy, I think I deserve a chance at ribbing you about it."

"Fair enough. I'm helping out at a theater club." Joe anticipated my surprise.

"I don't remember you ever being into drama. But, sorry, it's not that funny. Remind me not to book tickets to your stand-up comedy show."

"I want to be a teacher, so this drama school voluntary thing is really good on my résumé. That along with the American and English literature degree."

"The doctors still pissed you're not following in the family business?" We had a long-standing tradition of referring to his parents by their profession.

"No, they got over that a long time ago. I like kids, not sick people and books not bodies."

He realized what he said as his pale cheeks reddened a little.

"Not bodies? Not at all?" I echoed and allowed my eyebrows to rise.

"Maybe some bodies," he said and, in my wishful imagination, his eyes scanned over me, up and down. No, I didn't imagine it; he really did it. "Anyway, I've got to get going, don't want to be late. See you around."

And with that he was off, striding up the street, leaving me to pick up my toolbox, admire his behind and reflect on what just happened.

What the fuck just happened? I took a deep breath, unable to take my eyes off the sight of Joe slipping away from me.

I totally bottled and missed my opportunity.

We made no plans.

Fuck.

I didn't have to ask him on a date.

That's the difficult shit the straight guys had to do. He was a

guy, I was a guy, we used to hang out so why couldn’t we do it again? It shouldn't be this problematic.

CHAPTER TWO

Outnumbered.

Four lads, weak-kneed after clambering off the Ride of Doom, and abandoned by our mates who'd opted for Death Drop. The ground seemed to move beneath our feet. We stood no chance; no way to avoid the mob of girls. I didn't mind too much.

The ladies were merry; some appeared a little worse for alcohol. They draped themselves over us defenseless guys

I recognized a couple of girlfriends of team mates and some girls who were working through the team in a notches-on-the-bed-post way like they were collecting amateur footballers. Did women do that?

We knew them, a group of women who turned up to support the Pinvin Plumbers' football team every weekend. Football wouldn't be the same without the supporters, even in the amateur Working Men's League.

The lads, all apprentices in the building trade, had decided to hit the Jazz Festival at Southport. Not so much for the jazz, I don't know anything about it, but for the atmosphere, the fun fair, and the fact that it was it was within easy reach of everyone's homes.

The ladies contributed to the great atmosphere at the football ground and our post-match celebrations, so I certainly didn't begrudge them hanging around with us. The rest of the lads deserted us ages ago, not willing to wait in the line for the Ride of Doom.

You know how you don't see someone for ages, and then you keep running into them. This was turning into one of those days. We just about walked into Joe. Laughing and hanging on for dear life to a guy. He'd just come off the Waltzers and looked very shaky on his legs.

I wasn't surprised. I knew it left you feeling like the floor still spun beneath you, and I'd hold onto someone, too. Right now people were hanging onto me, and that didn't mean anything. But I couldn't help feeling just a little bit jealous because Joe held on to some guy who wasn't me. And that guy clung on to him.

Joe looked up at that moment and saw me. Our eyes locked, and I saw him bite his bottom lip, and then his tongue came out and licked his lips. And my tongue wanted to dash out and meet his tongue, to lick those full pink lips for him.

With two drunken ladies draped on either side of me at that

particular point in the evening, like cuddling a lamppost, I didn't want him to see me like this. If coincidences are possible, then they were conspiring against me, and absolutely refusing to present me in a good light in Joe's presence.

"Hi. Fancy seeing you again, twice in one day." Joe said, and I couldn't help but study his friend. He was so bright, colorful and shiny. Rarely do you see a guy wearing so much pink, glitter, and sequins, all at the same time, while still looking like a guy. I admired his courage, to walk around making such a bold statement even though I didn't like seeing him so close to Joe.

"Yeah. What about that." I tried to pull myself free of the ladies, but they held strong like giggling limpets. I'm not sure limpets giggle.

"You decided not to bring your lamppost."

"There are plenty around here when the time is right." I shook the girls free, finally, and they wandered off with the rest of the female tribe.

"We must stop meeting like this." I'm quite liking it. My god, was he flashing those eyes at me and flirting, or was that my imagination? Very wishful thinking.

"This is Reza." Joe introduced us. "This is Aaron, the boy from across the road." So I was explained but who the fuck was Reza? A chum from school or his fucking boyfriend? I felt more than mild annoyance seeing this guy with his hands on Joe.

"Hi, nice to meet you." Not. God, I'm thinking like a troubled child, a chocolate bar away from a tantrum.

"Ah, you're Aaron," said Reza. From the tone of his greeting he even knew something about me. Good or bad? Joe probably told him about this morning. Yes, I'm that clown, you can laugh at me.

The lads paid no attention. They were standing a few feet away looking at the next ride or at the girls standing in the queue, one or the other. But I couldn't take my eyes off Joe. I fancied him like crazy.

And just maybe he was gay because there was no way Reza was straight. He was dark skinned with black hair and black eyes, Indian probably. Good looking, in a he's-not-Joe sort of way, colorful and loud.

I suppose he looked fine at the fair by the seaside, but I couldn't imagine taking him home to meet the parents. I couldn't imagine him dressed like that in our street. The sequins were a tad too much, and I didn't know what to make of him.

Most importantly, was he Joe's boyfriend? I couldn't deny I felt gutted to see Joe with Reza, jealousy, regret over a missed opportunity if Joe had paired up with Reza. It hit me hard.

Everything I felt about Joe was irrational, but I felt it nevertheless. Joe and Reza wandered into the crowd, and I watched them go with a pang of envy.

They looked happy together, having such a good time. They saw other guys they knew. I watched as they waved and greeted their friends with enthusiastic hugs. It was madness, but I wished I were with them and Joe was looking and laughing and smiling at me like that.

Getting crazy jealous like this wasn't getting me anywhere in life. And hanging out with my straight friends meeting girls wasn't what I needed to be doing either.

I was ready to leave. Especially as it had reached that time in the evening that increasingly involved stalking females. The lads were all into girls, and if they weren't, they put up a really good show about it because they had me convinced they were all straight. And I had them convinced I was too. I hadn't given them any reason to think anything else. If they'd paid close attention they would have seen that I hadn't kissed any girls, I hadn't gone off with any girls, I didn't tell stories about girls. The lads all just assumed, and I let them.

I've known I was different, gay, as long as I've known Joe. I only fancied guys.

Hanging with my mates, going to the fair and stuff, it was fun, but there were other things I wanted to do. I needed to do. I had the dreadful feeling that I was only virgin among them. I'm surely the only person who has never had a kiss, not a proper kiss with someone I liked.

I made my excuses and left. They didn't pay too much attention to me as, like flies round jam, they had lost it, focusing on girls. I couldn't understand how curvy women turned these guys to jelly. Except, of course, Joe turns me into some fool who walks into lampposts and fills up with jealousy when I see him with another guy, so I guess I can understand it.

I didn't have a crush on Joe when we played together at eleven or twelve. I just knew I was different. I was older, about sixteen, when I confronted the fact that I was attracted to guys when most of my mates started dating or, at least, talking about girls.

I acknowledged I was gay, that was no problem, but I didn't see any reason to tell anybody else.

Nobody knew.

CHAPTER THREE

It took ages to get out of the car-park. Some drivers were doing the strangest maneuvers to get around the sharp corners. Obstructing everyone. When they painted the lines on the floor of the car-park, vehicles must have been smaller than they are today, or drivers more skillful.

My little van didn't move any faster when clear of the car park. Progression was at a walking pace along the congested street.

Coincidences occur in threes and, for the third time that day, I spied Joe waiting at a bus stop.

Inching along the road through the traffic allowed plenty of time to admire the view as I approached him from a distance. Standing tall, slender, with long legs. He had excellent posture, and I often wondered if they made him practice walking with a book on his head at that private school he used to attend. I liked the way he walked, but right now he was standing, waiting, alone. He was alone.

Minutes passed in which the vision fueled my desire for him.

I pulled up alongside and wound down the window.

"Joe, do you want a lift?"

His face lit up with recognition; he hadn't seen me approaching as he was looking for a bus, not a tired old plumber's van.

"Yeah, that would be great." He opened the creaking passenger door and climbed in.

A bit like the lamp post incident, my body wasn't coordinating with my brain. The words came out of my mouth in the wrong order and sounded like, "Where's your boyfriend?"

I didn't mean to say that. "I mean where is the friend you were with?"

I hadn't even started driving so I saw the surprise on his face and hoped he didn't see the embarrassment on mine. My face heated to the temperature of the van's exhaust, and I prayed the streetlights weren't enough to show my face lighting up like a beacon. But I continued mumbling.

"As in, where is that boy, your friend?"

"Reza. He lives here in this town. He can just walk home from here, and he just met up with his boyfriend." His boyfriend! Joe enunciated slowly and clearly, emphasizing those two words. His boyfriend. "I don't think they need me hanging around like a third wheel."

Joe snapped on his seat belt and fixed his eyes on me as if daring me to comment on the gay friend issue. I turned away to check the mirrors, click on the indicators and pull away into the traffic with Joe, myself and the proverbial elephant in the cab.

I could sense him still facing my direction. He continued to talk. "It's been a long day for me. So I wasn't taking any chances about missing the bus. It's quite a walk home."

A few miles. It's possible, I think most kids have walked it, but I understood.

My mind whirred, focused not on this journey home but Joe's previous comment. Reza has a boyfriend and Joe is just his buddy, Maybe Joe was gay and single, but was that too much to hope for?

How did I ask? I couldn't ask.

Once we were clear of the traffic, if the roads were empty, it was barely a ten-minute drive to our street on a good evening. And every chance that only this road was congested due to the Jazz Festival. I didn't know how long I had with Joe.

"So what are you doing with yourself these days then, Joe?" I asked, instead of what I really wanted to know, which was, are you interested in men? Would you like to go out with me?

"Just my degree and voluntary work with kids, teenagers."

"You are only just not a teenager!"

"I know! And yet I still have so much to give."

"So do you aim to be an English teacher, in a secondary school?"

"Yes, that's what I'm aiming for, though the additional experience with the drama kids and my music may just give me the edge competing for jobs. You know how they want teachers who can fill in and do many things."

"Yeah. I remember. School would fall apart if there weren't someone who could step in and play the piano at the drop of a hat in assembly."

"I'll be that guy," he said.

"You'll be wanted." *I want you! Don't say it aloud, Aaron!*

"They need teachers who can also play a musical instrument when it's the school concert, accompany the choir, that kind of thing."

"So why not train as a music teacher?"

"I didn't want to do a music degree. I can only play the bloody instruments because the doctors forced me to have lessons from an early age, whether I wanted to or not. Also, music lessons are a luxury, English is a core subject. Schools have to have English teachers, and I like English."

We traveled in silence for a few minutes.

"To give my folks credit, music has been good to me."

The destination was nearing too rapidly despite my careful driving and I wanted to keep communication going.

"I'll be qualified soon too, you saw my toolbox." *Well said, Aaron, keep the conversation flowing with innuendo.*

"Following in your father's footsteps as a plumber. Are you going to work with him?"

"When I've finished my apprenticeship? I don't think so; I don't plan on leaving my current boss."

"Does your dad mind? Does he want you to work with the competition?"

"Nah. There's loads of plumbing work. Most plumbers I know don't think of themselves as in competition with each other, and they often work together and help each other out. Like doctors and teachers."

"There was a ton of pressure on me to follow the doctors, but they had to give up on that when I just couldn't get the grades in science."

"What do they think of teaching?"

"It's second best to medicine, of course."

Finally, we turned into our road, the dead-end street on the side of a hill with a cemetery at the far end. I simply couldn't drive slow enough to prolong the journey. We were already traveling so slow that he could have gotten out and walked faster, but Joe didn't comment.

I needed to man up and say something because I couldn't count on having another opportunity like this. But I'd never asked a guy on a date before, and I didn't even know for sure if Joe was gay. I just knew that he didn't go home with Reza.

"What are you doing tomorrow? Do you fancy hanging out?" *That's it, don't over think it.* "Or have you got a day of amateur dramatics?" *Shut up Aaron, don't over talk it.* The brakes applied, the van and my mouth stopped moving.

"Yeah. Be cool. What's your number?" He whipped out his mobile phone faster than a gun-slinging hero from the wild west; perhaps he was about to ask me for my number anyway.

I told him the number.

"Oh. I've already got it. The same one you used to have."

My phone buzzed.

"I've sent you a message, so you've got mine. We can arrange by text."

"Is it the same old number for you too?"

"Yes. The doctors still pay for it as part of our whole internet and telecoms package."

I didn't tell him, but I still had his number too.

"Or do you have an instant messaging app?"

"Yeah, both, either's good for me."

Every fiber in my body wanted to lean across and give him a kiss. I'd obviously watched too many movies where that sort of thing happened. Joe didn't look like he wanted to kiss me, but he looked pretty excited, still holding his phone in his hand. He opened the passenger door and got out of the van.

"See ya tomorrow."

CHAPTER FOUR

Sunday mornings were just like any other, not quite clambering out of bed as early as on a workday but not much of a lie in either. I arrived at the football ground by nine to warm up and hang out with the other early arrivals. The more dedicated of us liked to get there early especially when the weather was good.

A surprising number turned up just before kick off with only minutes to spare. We cursed them for not taking it seriously. They told us we should either get a life, or get laid.

They weren't entirely wrong.

Some guys played like their life depended on it and it was the main event of the week, both for them and the crowd of supporters. The hard core of thirty or so people who turned up to every game of the Pinvin Plumbers.

I buzzed with the thought of meeting Joe later. From kickoff, a football match would take my mind off him for the morning. In the soccer zone for the ninety-minute duration of the game, I possessed single-minded focus. Everything else ceased to exist; I was no longer a plumber or trainee plumber. There was no Joe, no boss, no college. Just us twenty-two guys, the ref, the linesmen and the pitch.

It was a team game. When we won, we all won, not just the striker; if we lost it wasn't the goalkeeper's fault for letting those goals past. It was the whole team working together, defending, attacking, getting the ball to the right player at the right time.

I enjoyed hearing the crowd calling for us. They always did. Shouting out directions and abuse, as if they could do better. The female spectators were just as vocal as the men. There were times when you wanted to pick them out and tell them you were giving it your all. But they were right. We were here to do better, and football was a spectator sport.

Along with my teammates, I ran miles, and we were fighting right up to the line. With eighty minutes gone, ten minutes left and everything to play for, we were up against one of the better teams. Better at our level. Our goalie made a terrific save, just when it seemed too late to snatch victory back from the yawning mouth of defeat. There were some great passes, within our team. Why didn't we play like that earlier? Back down the other side of the pitch. Dean passed it to me; there's an opening, and I did my job.

The crowd went wild; the girls went wild, the same girls from

last night. Keith scored: our hero because I passed it to him and we were all in the right positions. It wasn't over yet. The Rovers had put up a hell of a good fight for this clash and there were still minutes on the clock.

We were ahead, but we couldn't afford to be complacent. Teams were known to score three goals in the closing minutes, in injury time. To move from defeat to clear victory in the last minute of a game, so we could leave nothing to chance.

Minutes left, it could still be anyone's morning and finally, those late arrivals had woken up to the fact that this was a fuckin' match and not the warm up. The Rovers had played us off the pitch for most of the game. Tackle! Dean! Roy! Me. Go, go, go. Their goalie was as broad as the goal, all over the place, and with arms like an octopus, like nothing was getting past him.

Goal! Dean! You a fuckin' fancy-footed footie hero. Pete and I reached Dean at the same time, squashing him in a three-way bear hug before others reached us.

The final goal of the game seconds before the final whistle. The Pinvin Plumbers made good and walked off that pitch elated. Dean did a funky dance to music that only he could hear.

The other team did the losers' walk of shame, forging ahead swiftly with heads bowed as if to say what a waste of a Sunday morning.

For a minute or two, I went with the familiar routine, walking off the pitch, slapping a few congratulating hands, forgetting that this Sunday I wasn't going to the Flying Horse for our regular Sunday lunch and post-match celebrations. I had somewhere better to go.

Once the game was over, there was something even more exciting to capture my thoughts. It didn't take long for my thoughts to turn to getting out of here and meeting Joe. By the time I reached the locker room, I was filled with excitement about the coming afternoon. I just changed from football boots to regular trainers and grabbed my stuff.

"Where are you off to? Not coming to the pub?" asked Pete, noting I wasn't showering and changing with the rest of them. A sure sign I was going straight home to smarten up.

"No."

"Hey Aaron, aren't you coming to the Horse for lunch?" Jimmy caught up with the conversation.

"Is not compulsory is it?" I replied pushing my muddy boots into a bag.

"I know that but I thought you thought it was. You're always there. I reckon you even go there when there's no Sunday match."

"Ha. Ha."

"So where can you possibly be going that's more important?" asked Pete.

Jimmy piped up. "Is your mom taking you out to get new school shoes, or you got a date?"

Whoops went up among the nearest guys in the locker room.

"You got a date?" asked Dean. For him, there was only one reason not to hang out with the lads, and he had the longest running relationship of all us younger players.

"Yes, that's exactly it." Why did I say that? Joe didn't know, and it was all in my imagination. "No needs to be surprised." I was not done digging that hole.

"Is she hot?" Pete asked.

"Of course, she's hot. A good looking bloke like Aaron's got pulling power." Dean interrupted. "I want to know who is she?"

"I'll look forward to seeing your new school shoes." Jimmy grinned.

"And I want to see undressed pictures. NSFW."

"There'll be no photos," I said and moved toward the door. "And I got no time to share details if I'm going to get to the feet measuring appointment on time."

Still smelling of sweat and dirt, wearing my green, grass-stained knees like a badge, I replaced the football boots with my trainers. After grabbing the rest of my stuff from the locker room, I made my exit. One last look at their grins and I was out of there, still in my dirty kit, straight out to my van to make the journey home.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wearing my kit, I sat behind the steering wheel, on my way home within minutes of the final whistle.

I drove home on a high with the satisfaction of winning overshadowed by the excitement and anticipation of the afternoon ahead.

My first date. Shame he didn't know it was a date.

After showering at my own house, I was at his door early in the afternoon, and the nerves had really set in.

I didn't know where we were going to go, although I was prepared with a few suggestions. What if we ran into some of the team while we were out? I'd let them believe there was somebody special tempting me away for the afternoon. Like a madman, I'd let them share my fantasy. But they all thought I was seeing a girl.

Joe's face beamed when he opened the door wide inviting me in. A warm welcome that made me glow on the inside.

"Hi," *You look nice.*

Memo to self, don't compliment him on how he looks, stick with something safe.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Are you dead set on going out? Or do you mind if we stay in?"

"No, that's fine. Staying in is good." He had no idea how relieved I was. I would have invited myself to his house if it was acceptable to do so. "Why do you want to stay in?"

With that settled he led me across to the library. Yes, they had a room they called the library. Lined with wall to wall books and, like every room in the house, as big as three rooms in my home.

"To be honest, I walked miles this morning and the weekdays are busy. I wouldn't mind just staying in, relaxing. Do you want to play Xbox or watch a film or something?"

Or something else?

I wondered. I had to calm down, I was like a dog in heat. "Either sounds good to me. Are the doctors home?"

"No. Mom and Dad are both out. They're sorting out one of the rented houses. Upgrading it, I think, to make it even nicer for a new tenant, who is the child of one of their medical consultant friends."

"So how come you walked miles this morning?"

"Round of golf."

I was aware he played golf. He'd had clubs way back when we

used to hang out as kids. And since I became a spy at my bedroom window, from time to time, I'd seen him loading them into his dad's car. Nevertheless, it never crossed my mind while I was running my socks off this morning that he was also doing something sporting. He always was one of those strange boys not into football, and he didn't even support a team. Perhaps it was the running he didn't like or team games.

I sat down on the two-seater sofa in the library, where I had sat many times before. Joe held up a TV remote control in one hand and a game console controller in the other with a questioning look on his face.

"I'm easy," I replied to the unspoken question.

"Good to know. But that's not what I was asking. Film or game? I've got a choice of films to watch, American crime films, I should watch for my course."

"I thought you were doing English literature." I was puzzled.

"American and English literature. Yes, Shakespeare, Dickens, Chaucer are all on the syllabus I could even do a module on Beowulf if I wanted to."

"That sounds cool." We'd watched the scary film together more than once.

"Unfortunately, it involved studying a poem written over a thousand year ago, not so much watching Ray Winston and Angelina Jolie in a gory film. I'm doing a module about American fiction and its impact on films instead. An excuse to watch films, of course."

"A film sounds good to me," I replied.

"With snacks or pizza?"

"A film and snacks and pizza, even better."

"Okay. No monsters this afternoon sorry. I've got a list of films to watch for college, or you can choose something else." He pointed in the direction of a pile of DVDs and a paper list. Many of the films were old. I picked out of the modern ones.

I'd only just accepted the language, English, when he returned with bowls of pretzels and nuts which he popped down on the small table in front of the sofa. He disappeared again, returning a moment later with a large bottle of something fizzy and orange and a couple of glasses, which he placed beside the bowls of snacks.

Of course, there was only one two-seater couch in the library so Joe sat down next to me. It was cosy and more relaxed than a formal sitting room.

"I hate to be a nag but no pizza?"

"Later. Now play the movie." He picked up the case. "Troy, good choice."

I pressed play and picked up the bowl of mixed salted peanuts,

cashews and pecans. Joe moved closer to me on the small sofa, and I held the bowl.

"Are you after my nuts?" I couldn't believe I was telling corny jokes; I smiled to myself.

Trying to concentrate on the film, I'd seen it before but forgotten how much naked, male flesh was in almost every scene. I couldn't help focusing on the heat coming from Joe's body, the scent of shampoo in his clean blond hair that needed cutting, and stealing glances at his side profile. Mesmerized by his delicate features, pale skin and blue eyes, I lost track of what was going on in the film. I wasn't sure that my breathing was as steady as it used to be back in the days when I felt a whole lot calmer, and I was not sitting so close to the guy I'd had a crush on for the past few years.

Did he know that I was looking at him more than the TV? I just couldn't concentrate. Absorbed, Joe's expressive face reacted to the action on screen. When he laughed I just wanted to kiss him. I feared that might happen, not on purpose, just on impulse.

One minute I enjoyed being next to him and the next, I was seized with self-conscious panic. I struggled out from the chair, and he was so close to me that I had to push him away. I stood up abruptly, placed the near-empty bowl on the table and left the room. I knew the way to all the bathrooms in this house; I'd been in every room over the years. It was terrific for games of hide-and-seek.

The hand soap smelled refreshing and good enough to eat, mangoes apparently. Not a budget supermarket home brand, nothing but the best for the doctors. I hoped the cold water splashed on my face was enough to bring me to my senses. Had I been in here too long? Would he think there was something wrong with me? Maybe he wouldn't even notice, but he must think it bit odd, the way I rushed out. I couldn't even remember what it was like to leave for the bathroom under normal circumstances. I was such a mess. After deep breaths, I returned to the library.

The film was on pause, and Joe had moved to the far side of the sofa, leaving plenty of space at the end where I'd sat. In fact, it seemed like he couldn't get further away from me unless he moved to the floor in the corner of the room.

"Are you okay?" he asked with genuine concern on his face. He didn't look like the same person who'd laughed mercilessly at me in the street only the day before.

"Yeah, I am fine." I sat down, and stared at the screen ready for him to press play. But he didn't.

"There is something I should tell you," he said, "and maybe you already know."

I had no idea what was coming next. "What?" I had to look at

him.

"I'm gay."

Why wasn't I ready for those words?

"You didn't seem upset with finding out about Reza last night so I thought you might be okay with it. If not... well, that's who I am." He paused as if there was more to say but it wasn't forthcoming. Had he gotten the wrong impression when I rushed off? Did he think it was a display of homophobia?

"I'm fine with it." My temperature soared with embarrassment, and I was sure he saw me go bright red. But how would he interpret my reaction? I couldn't risk him getting the wrong impression but, by my mango scented hands, I was put on the spot.

"I'm more than fine with it." I don't know how those words crawled out of my mouth, and I hoped they didn't sound as shaky as I felt. "I need to know if you're fine with something, too."

Oh my god. My mouth started working all on its own, and I really wasn't sure what it intended to say.

"Okay, your turn," Joe said as the silence lasted.

"First, I need to know something."

"What?"

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

He shook his head. "No."

"I want to kiss you, and I just need to know if you'd be fine with that." I'd said it! Out loud. But my heart pounding in my ears seemed louder than the words.

Joe looked stunned.

I was stunned too. I thought my traitorous mouth was going to out me, but it went one step further.

CHAPTER SIX

For the longest minute in the history of minutes, he stared at me, and I wondered how I'd go about getting those words back in my mouth.

Then he came closer to me, not a lunge exactly because it was slow and careful. He slowly and carefully lunged at me, and the minute after the longest minute turned out to be the very best minute in the history of minutes.

And not just one minute.

We kissed for several.

At first, our lips were closed, pressed against each other's. Then they sort of worked themselves open. I tasted the hot wet inside of his mouth, and his tongue was entering my mouth making me want to moan and squirm. I'm not sure how I breathed, through my nose, I guess. Maybe I didn't breathe and simply came up for air just in time.

My eyes kept shutting. It was difficult to keep them open when my other senses were so engaged with what was happening.

Somehow, Joe was on top, draped over me.

My back pushed into the corner of the small sofa with Joe's face against mine, his lips pushed against mine, our tongues tasting each other. The world became a magical place. Fairies may have flown into the room; Santa crashed down the chimney. I wouldn't know. Nothing existed outside of Joe and me. The TV was still on pause so not a sound or anything else intruded upon us.

That kiss could have lasted the rest of the day, and I'd have been happy. I wanted nothing more than to kiss him and touch him and be with him.

Having never done this before, though, until Joe pulled away, I wasn't aware that my hands weren't moving but remained pinned against the sofa like leaden weights.

"Is that the sort of kiss you had in mind?" he asked.

More! I thought. Keep it together Aaron. I've made enough of a fool of myself in front of this man this weekend. "Yeah," I replied. "That's exactly the sort of kiss."

The glue that was holding my hands down dissolved. Released, I moved toward him. This time, we met in the middle and I put my hands on him. A hand to the back of his head to pull him to me, a hand on the side of his face. And he put his arms around me. We kissed again.

They say things are never as good the second time round. The second piece of chocolate or cake never tastes as good as the first. The rule of diminishing returns does not apply in relation to kisses. Like a kid on Christmas day, I never wanted it to end. Maybe, just maybe, this was better than football. At that moment, like when playing football in the morning, nothing else existed beyond what I was doing there and then.

I didn't want it to go further, either. Not in my mind anyway, another part of my body may have thought Christmas was on its way and wanted to push forward with a mission of its own. The pressure built and pushed hard to burst through my pants.

There was going to be no final whistle. We were both winners in this game as far as I could tell. But the final whistle did come abruptly. Not the shrill piercing high pitch noise of the football field but a clunking noise as the front door lock unhitched and the door swung open.

We moved back from each other; Joe smiled at me completely relaxed, whereas I felt as if his parents had walked in on me while I was on the toilet. They didn't enter the room, didn't know I was there and had no idea about us kissing. How would they react if they knew we were making out in the library?

And.

OMG, I became self-conscious of things growing between us. Thank god I was wearing restricting jeans and not something that would tent out front. If I looked anything like Joe, with puffy red lips, then it was obvious we'd been making out on the sofa for the afternoon. The film was still on pause, and the energy saving function of the TV screen had turned it to black.

Joe took my hand in his, clicked the TV remote with the other, presumably so we didn't look so conspicuous if his parents walked in on us. He didn't even glance at the TV, his eyes remained fixed on me.

"It's okay, Aaron; they know I'm gay. It's not a problem." That was easy for Joe to say.

But no one knows I am. Except you, of course, I thought.

I'd never talked about this sort of thing before. I was infinitely more comfortable kissing rather than talking about kissing. My brain was best suited to physical stuff, to action, along with an internal commentary. At that moment the commentary was stuck repeating the phrases, *I'm holding hands with Joe Blackwell,* and *I've been snogging with Joe Blackwell.*

"They probably won't come in here anyway," he said.

I didn't know what to say so I turned my attention to the TV, but I didn't let go of Joe's hand, and he kept holding mine.

Joe moved closer to me, as he had earlier, leaning against me

holding hands this time. He appeared to be watching the film. I stayed in that position and sometimes actually heard what the actors were saying. Mostly, though, I focused on how comfortable this felt.

I released Joe's hand and put my arm around his shoulder allowing him to get even closer. Rather than concentrating on the film, I enjoyed the feeling. Tried to block out the thought of other people in this house. They might know that Joe was gay, but they didn't know about me.

All good things must come to an end. I didn't know if the film was one of those good things, but when the credits rolled, Joe squirmed a little against me. His hand moved over my knee and squeezed.

"Would you like to see me again?" Joe seemed hesitant and nervous for the first time that day.

"See you?" I was an idiot.

"Would you like to do something like this again?"

And I asked, "Does that question mean it's time for me to go?"

"No!" He turned his head to look at me. "No, you could stay all night."

I'm not sure if it's my imagination, but he seemed a little red as he realized what he'd said, and I felt my face flush, too.

"I mean you don't have to go right now. We haven't had pizza yet."

"Yeah, what happened to the pizza?"

"I forgot about it when I got distracted." He blushed. "It's still early. You up for the pizza and another film?"

"So are you asking me out?" I asked.

"Yeah. We should go out," he said. "Although I've rather enjoyed staying in." He grinned with a cheeky look. And heat rose through my body.

"Can I ask you some stuff?" he said.

"You can't say something like that and then not ask the question, leaving me wondering," I said. "So it's too late now. Go ahead and ask."

"Does your family across the road know you're gay?"

I couldn't hold his gaze and think about coming out to anybody at the same time. I wanted to be honest with him, but I also felt a bit embarrassed.

"Nobody knows," I said. "Except you, of course."

If he was surprised, it didn't show on his face. "Well, I kind of guessed," he said.

"How did you guess?" I asked. I didn't think I gave off any gay vibe; I thought I was just like all the other lads and nothing like his friend Reza.

"It was the way you were kissing me. That definitely gave it away."

"I thought you meant, somehow, you knew before then." I was a little relieved.

"You mean, like the way you were checking me out yesterday?"

My first impulse was denial, I wasn't checking him out, but, honestly, I was. I didn't answer before he spoke again.

"I'll go get the frozen pizza in the oven, and then we'll choose another film."

"Great." Great! Fuck yeah! It was still early on a Sunday, time for another film and a lot more snogging.

We watched the beginning of the DVD, sticking with the Greek theme I chose Clash of the Titans. After ten minutes Joe fetched the hot pizza. We continued to watch as we ate. But when the final slices were eaten, our plates were down, and Joe snuggled up to me with my arm around his shoulder we soon returned to getting to know each other better.

I loved the feel of his face sliding against mine. I could smell him. His tongue in my mouth felt like it was always meant to be there.

For my first make-out session with a guy it was exciting to have my hands on his chest, his arms, on his thighs and the most intimate contact of all, touching his face and wrapping his hair around my fingers.

Our hands explored each other, over our clothes, touching everywhere but not there. Joe didn't touch my crotch. If he had, I'm sure I'd have lost it completely. He had no idea how close I was to the ultimate humiliation; but I avoided coming in my pants.

I resisted the temptation to put my hand on his bulge whilst mauling him. I didn't need to touch his cock to know it was hard. I could see that straining, and I could feel the reaction in his whole body, in his kisses. We didn't need to do everything straight away and not going as far as we could was exciting in itself. He was into me too, and this bit of information was the absolute highlight of the day.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Before leaving Joe's home, I took the precaution of visiting the bathroom to get myself back under control. I checked that my face didn't have, *"I've been kissing a dude across the road all afternoon,"* written all over it. Unlikely, I know. But who knew what would happen after actually kissing the dude across the road for hours?

The embarrassment of my parents catching me walking across the street with this hard-on was impetus enough for me to concentrate on making it less of a hard-on.

For all the luxurious gadgets and mango scented hand wash in the doctors' home, it was a great shame they didn't have a powerful electric hand dryer in the guest cloakroom.

My underwear was wet and sticky. There was not much I could do about that. A powerful hand dryer would have been useful. I imagined standing in that little room, stripped from the waist downward and holding my undergarments under the hot blower. I dabbed at my boxers with tissue paper, for all the good it did. It doesn't make any difference, but you have to give it a go.

My jeans hadn’t just reined in my erection, hiding a multitude of raunchy thoughts. The thick denim also proved an effective barrier against leaking precum. Soaked on the inside but with no exterior evidence.

Memo to self: must always wear jeans when with Joe and absolutely no flimsy cotton shorts.

All too embarrassing.

Deep breaths, Aaron, no, don't think about Joe.

I was bloody ages in that bathroom thinking about my mom's face if she could see me like that; it was a great passion killer. When I had everything under control, I went out to face the world, on my shaky legs that still didn't work properly.

I didn't walk home. I floated home on a chariot of exhilaration.

Half the time spent at Joe's home must have involved kissing and touching each other. When that wasn't happening, I was half watching a film and half looking at him. He was always lovely in my eyes, but had matured into something even more beautiful over the last few years.

Beautiful, that's not a word to describe a bloke. What is going on in my oxygen starved brain? Perhaps lack of blood flow around my body for such an extended period had caused brain damage.

Something had changed.

At my door I slipped my key into the lock and hoped I'd be able to slip up to my room, perhaps grab a cold shower and gather some semblance of normality about myself before facing others. I wasn't the same man who left my parents' house earlier that day. And I hoped they didn't notice the difference because I wasn't ready to tell them what had changed.

"Come on in here, Sean's here." The door hadn't even closed behind me when my mom's voice called out from the sitting room. Unlike Joe's home, ours was constructed on a much smaller scale, and you couldn't avoid anyone else who was home.

"I hear you've been on a date."

That was Sean's voice; he couldn't even wait for me to enter the room. When I did everyone had eyes on me, even dad briefly glanced up from the TV. Should I confirm or deny?

"Where did you hear a story like that?" I replied. Confirming would lead to way too much trouble, they'd want to know who and where.

"I went to the pub hoping to catch you after football. Your teammates were on a high after winning. She must be something special to take you away from the victor's lunch. Or did you have some other kind of victory celebration?" Sean's eyebrows rose with the suggestiveness of his tone of voice.

I thought Mom might object to the obvious innuendo. But she looked curious, wanting to know more about my girlfriend.

Dad was watching football on the TV that was constantly on in our house, and Dad was constantly looking at it. I think he found great comfort in being able to look at the TV instead of looking at the rest of us even when engaged in conversation.

Girlfriends! I'd let them think that I saw girls, but there was no one special enough to bring home. Oh yes, no one special enough to even mention her name. Sometimes I'd just talk about the girls who were going round with the football team, so that I was throwing in girls names into conversations. But I told no lies. I never suggested I'd done anything with any girl that I wouldn't do with my mother.

People assume too much.

"Why were you at the Flying Horse?" I asked.

"A man can want to see his younger brother can't he?"

"He can. Why after the football match? Why not come to the match?"

"Was otherwise engaged at that time, having a match of my own. A slanging match with Jesse, to be honest."

It seemed I should say something. "Oh."

"We've split up, Aaron, and I couldn't find you, and you weren't

answering your phone, I had to get somebody else to help me move my stuff."

"So you wanted something."

"Of course, I wanted you for something." He raked his hand through his brown hair; he looked tired.

Mom jumped up. "I'll get you a cup o'tea."

An afternoon and evening of kissing were very dehydrating, so I welcomed the offer. Joe was pretty much left to his own devices; I rarely saw his parents when we were younger. Today, we heard them but never saw them. Joe did the catering, if presenting ready-made snacks and frozen pizza constitute catering. Entirely different to my home. Mom doesn't do everything, but she does a lot.

"I've still got more stuff to get back from Jesse but for now, the spare room here is full."

I didn't know we had a spare room. Sean was obviously talking about the dining room that no one ever ate in, where sleeping bags and camp beds were sometimes set out for guests and the table space was largely used as an office.

"He's not exaggerating. We thought he could share your room for a while."

If mom had brought my tea in sooner, I could've spat it out. I needed some private time with my thoughts, as soon as possible, not a gatecrasher in my bedroom.

"Yes. No problem." My teeth weren't gritted. Despite the emotional high that I was still floating on I did feel genuinely sorry to hear Sean and Jesse had split up. "I thought you were such a good match. Together forever."

Sean looked like he was ready to say more but Dad spoke first, so he was in on the conversation. "It's probably for the best, and at least, it's before you've had any children. Best to learn these things early on."

Mom came back with a cup of tea for me.

"You haven't told us about the girlfriend you've been keeping secret or was it the first date?" Sean prompted, changing the subject.

"Who told you?"

"Dean at the Horse."

"Nothing to tell. It's in his imagination. I was just hanging out with some other mates." Denial was the best option, not concocting a story and digging myself into a deeper hole. I should have denied it when Dean asked me in the first place.

"You do wise to avoid women, bro. Nothing but trouble," said Sean with a surprising edge of bitterness.

Dad coughed. I wasn't always sure when Dad was in on a conversation or lost in a world of TV football. His gaze flitted away

from the TV briefly to land on me. "Twenty years old and you've never brought a girl home. Your brothers were in love with a new girl every ten minutes at your age and younger." He referred to my two older brothers, Sean and Simon, of course, not the annoying teenager, Mark, who was undoubtedly in his room playing on his computer as we spoke.

Picking up the tea off the table, I said, "Thanks, Mom. I'm going to take this upstairs." Looking at Sean, I continued, "I got to get my apprenticeship work experience journal updated to discuss with the boss tomorrow. I'll make space in my room for you, too. Night all."

Enough of a hint that I wanted time alone before Sean crashed in my room.

CHAPTER EIGHT

There were a few things that needed more urgent attention than my brother Sean. He was going to be around for days, and this couldn't wait. I had to get out of this underwear, and my dick would never forgive me if I didn't finish off the process set in motion. Even though my cock wasn't hard now, after hours of arousal, I needed release. And with the prospect of Sean crashing in my room for the night, I had to get there before his bedtime.

An excuse about getting my plumbing experience record up to date so I could discuss it with my boss tomorrow, in time to make any amendments before taking it into college on Thursday, sounded reasonable and gave me a reason to be alone, for a while.

For many years, I lamented the fact that we had no locks on our bedroom doors. People don't normally have locks on their doors in their homes do they? And we're just a normal family, in a normal family home. Much as my mom, dad, and annoying younger brother don't often come into my room, and they do knock, I can't presume these things will always happen. Sometimes I'd put a chair under the handle, other times I preferred the extra security afforded by a barricade, piling every movable item in front of the door.

I turned the music on as loud as I thought I could get away with without anyone banging on the door, but at the same time as loud as possible so that it might cover up any revealing noises I might make. I then set the full barricade in position.

It wasn't just the prospect of Sean barging in to sleep in my room; I needed to get my hands on my dick. I tore off my clothes, fast, stumbling over my socks and getting my jeans caught around my ankles. As I pulled my top over my head all I could smell was Joe, he'd been up close to me for a long time, and his scent had impregnated my cotton top.

I put the shirt over my face, almost rolling it under my nose and over my mouth to drink in his flavor.

Eventually, I slipped into my bed and completely immersed myself beneath the duvet, pulling it over my head, so I was in a warm, dark and sound-insulated space. What an idiot I must've looked. Buried under the cotton, with my T-shirt over my face and my bedroom door barricaded.

My dick knew what to expect, it appreciated the preparation and it was already as stiff as a rolling pin.

I put a hand on my balls and the other firmly around my shaft pulling the foreskin back slowly and then returning it over the head. Although I had been aching for this for hours, I didn't want to rush it. I wanted to remember everything about my time with Joe

Precum leaked onto my fingers and stomach. I let go of my balls and twirled my fingers in the sticky liquid, rubbing it around the head of my cock with my fingertips.

Was I thinking of Joe doing this or of doing this to Joe? Nice thoughts but the answer is no.

I was just thinking about what it was like to kiss Joe and feel his warm body on top of mine as we'd canoodled on that sofa and how much I'd like to do that again. This, what I was doing now, naked and with my cock in my hand, was something I'd only ever done on my own. Often done while looking at nameless, unknown men via the wonderful service of porn on the net. But my brain was filled with thoughts of a very real person and I knew his name. He was only a few yards away from me. And maybe he was doing the same thing, thinking about me.

Maybe I did think about Joe doing this to himself or me doing it to him or him to me.

Too much.

I stopped moving my hand as I felt my cock throb, and then a few good thrusts into my fist as I reached the climax and spunk shot out over my stomach, chest and shoulder.

Fuck! I may have said that aloud.

Coated with sticky cum and I felt pretty damn good.

CHAPTER NINE

Dinner was ready for me when I got home. I don't know how mom always achieved this miracle. She goes out to work as well, but no matter what time I arrived home there was always a meal waiting for me, whether I wanted it or not.

For once I wasn't hungry and hadn't been hungry all day.

Exiting the house sharpish on Monday evening after work, I didn't want to face my family and make excuses about where I was going. They could see my van still on the driveway and would know I hadn't driven anywhere, but for all they knew, I may have walked into town or been picked up by mates at the top of the street. Both of those things were fairly typical.

The one thing that was unusual was the thing I was actually doing, walking across the street to Joe's house. Twice in two days. This hadn't happened since more than two years ago.

Exactly what was different about Joe, as he opened the door, was difficult to identify. It could be that today he was somebody I had kissed and was hoping to do so again whereas at any point in the past that had not happened.

"Come on up to my room."

I kicked off my shoes and left them next to a pile of shoes and a shoe rack near the front door as I always had in the past when visiting Joe. He was dancing about on the bottom step, eager to go up stairs but waiting for me.

His folks were probably in, and I thought I heard movement from the kitchen at the back of the house, but I wasn't invited to speak to them.

Whereas my side of the road consisted of semi-detached family houses, on the opposite side, where Joe lived, the detached homes were built to an entirely different scale. I'd been in his room many times, of course. Still, the size of it impressed me. The sleeping area, with bed and associated items, took up just one corner. My gaze fell upon the unavoidable massive double bed. In previous years I might have just gone and sat on his bed, picked up a couple of the books off the book mountain that teetered precariously next to it. I'd have playfully mocked him about titles about Wallflowers and Misfits.

I didn't go near the bed and tried not to look at it.

Instead, I plonked myself down on the nearest seat to the door, sat down in the center of the wide piano stool not facing toward the

electric keyboard but facing into the room. The bedroom was a bit of a mess, but he had space for piles of books and DVDs, everywhere.

There were so many questions at the front of my mind after I had time to process what had happened between us. The previous day, I was too busy enjoying the kissing to interrupt it with conversation.

"Can I ask you something?" I said to Joe, feeling sheepish.

I was sitting down at his keyboard my back to the keys. It was electronic, so it wasn't going to make any sound without flicking the switch. Just as well as I couldn't play anyway.

"Ask me anything. There's plenty of things I can't tell you the answer to. Physics questions are not my strong point, but if it is about Shakespeare, I'll give it a good go."

He came and sat next to me on the piano stool, which surprised me. It was wide enough for two people. He faced in the opposite direction to me, turned on the power and rested his hands on the keys.

The sound was down low, and I turned to watch him. Mesmerizing and distracting. He could turn simple taps and tiny movements into melodic sounds. He made it look so easy and natural, not as if it was something that he spent, I don't know how many, years learning to do.

"How many years have you been playing the piano?"

"Oh, goodie. A quiz about me. I can probably answer those questions. Let me see." He didn't hesitate for long, but he hit a few more keys on the keyboard. "I can't remember, but I was a little kid so definitely more than ten years. I was playing in junior school."

The tune sounded familiar.

"Is this one of those sessions where we take turns to ask things or is it just a one-way question and answer event?"

"Ask me anything you want," I replied. "I can warn you I know nothing about Shakespeare and not much about playing the piano either."

"I already know that." He did know me pretty well.

I turned around beside him to face the keyboard and it was hard to resist pressing down on some of the keys, but that would have ruined the pleasing sound Joe was making. I wanted to fidget. There was something in front of me, and Joe made it look easy.

"When did your folks find out you're gay?" Now I was moving to the heart of the matter rather rapidly. Getting onto the subject that I'd never discussed with anybody before.

"I guess I would have been about fourteen." He didn't look up from his focus on the keyboard.

I was surprised by this answer. "So you mean, way back when we used to hang out. When I used to come over and play Xbox, you

knew then? And your parents knew?" I couldn't imagine my parents knowing something like that about me when I was still a school kid.

Joe didn't miss a beat on the keyboard; he didn't falter. This was not a tricky conversation for him.

Star Wars, I finally recognized the music from the film series.

"I'd always known. At that time, there were issues at school, and I was forced to have the talk with the doctors." The doctors were how we often referred to his folks when we were putting considerable distance between us and the adult representations of authority. That's about as rebellious as we got.

"The doctors were very supportive, the school was supportive, and it turned out well. Not like the horror stories you hear from other queer teenagers."

I didn't know any other queer teenagers to tell me horror stories, but I didn't mention this. I could guess how those stories might go.

His life was unimaginable to me except that I could see it, taking place just across the street. There were no out gay kids at my school. Blessed Joe lived in a magnificent house with a cleaner, had an expensive paid-for education and music lessons. And no coming out trauma; he even knew he was gay for always. Everything was so fucking perfect on this side of the street; I wanted a slice of it.

But how could I expect him to want me as I wanted him? I'd just be a disappointment.

"There were no out gay kids in my school," I said. "I can't imagine telling people at that age."

"Did you know then?" Joe asked. He was still focused on the music and not looking at me which made this conversation easier than if we'd been face to face.

Without having to think about it, I answered. "Yes, I knew I was. I didn't know about you though, Joe. It never crossed my mind. How come you never told me?"

"Back then? You never told me either." Joe had a point.

"I never told anyone," I pointed out.

"Okay. I liked spending time with you, and it never came up between us and I thought if it did it might ruin everything. You were so different to anyone else I knew." He stopped playing and finally turned to look at me. "You're not like any of my friends, and I didn't know how you'd react. To be honest, I didn't think it would go well. I never guessed you were gay too."

I looked into his blue eyes, his face so close to mine and inside my head one word kept passing through my brain over and over again, kiss, kiss, kiss.

"So, it must be my turn for a question." Still looking at me, his

hands resting above the keyboard. "Have you come out to anybody?"

I couldn't think of a clever retort. After yesterday I wanted to simply pick up where we left off. "Only you."

Luckily, if telepathy exists, Joe has it. He leaned forward and kissed me; he didn't need to lean far because we were already squashed together on the piano stool. It was just a peck, a brief light touching of our lips and I didn't want it to end there.

As if by making the first move Joe had given me permission to follow my heart, I took the initiative and put my arm around his shoulder, placing my hand on the back of his head. I drew him to me and this time, our lips stayed together. My other arm crossed his body naturally, and I held onto him.

Kissing. This was what we were meant to be doing. Why weren't we doing this five years ago? Four years ago? Two years ago? I stopped hanging around with Joe around the time that he started concentrating on A-levels, which were much harder than secondary school work, and my plumbing apprenticeship was underway.

We both knew about ourselves by then but not about each other.

Why had we wasted all this time?

CHAPTER TEN

Squashed. In retrospect, squashed together on a piano stool, sideways on, with a piano in front of us, was not the most comfortable way to kiss. Joe's hands were on me, mine on him. Only when he pulled away from me and suggested we move, did it occur to me that this was not the most comfortable way to do what we were doing. In fact, it was possibly one of the least comfortable ways, but I had so little to compare it to. This was still one of those "greatest moments of my life," moments.

He stood up and took my hand and I followed his lead, which led to the, oh-my-god, bed. I gulped, equal parts nervous, apprehensive and excited.

I'd hung out on Joe's bed so many times. As I had in the bedrooms of various mates, but never had it involved snogging.

I certainly wanted to go there, and the fear of doing something wrong wasn't great enough to act as any deterrent.

We were fully clothed, and Joe hadn't suggested anything else but even if he had, I'm sure I would have gone with it. I was totally up for whatever, and my dick was way ahead of me.

He sat down on the bed and pulled me toward him. I hesitated, standing between his open legs. Joe must've sensed my apprehension.

"Is this okay? Are you okay?" he asked.

I should have been pleased that he was sensitive enough to notice and to care about my nervousness, but I didn't want him to draw attention to it. I didn't need us to focus on the fact that I'd never snogged anybody on a bed before, or that I was an inexperienced novice.

What I lacked in practical experience, I am sure I could make up for with enthusiasm, a considerable amount of solo practice and online research.

"This is more than fine," I said. And I meant it.

He lay back on the bed, pulling me toward him. And I willingly got on top of him, lying flat, my legs straddling his hips. Nature took over. Our lips met and melded together. His mouth was hot, wet and very sexy. I could taste him, up close, my senses overloaded with the taste of him and the scent of his skin and the feel of his body against mine.

My arousal was instantaneous. Every part of me hummed with pleasure but still I was aware of my cock hardening and his. Even

through our clothes, I could feel his erection against me.

The grinding of my hips was pure instinct bringing pleasurable pressure to my needy body rutting against his.

Without breaking any contact, with his tongue still in my mouth, from the bottom Joe pushed me over so that we rolled onto our sides, facing each other.

I opened my eyes; that was when I realized I'd closed them. His eyes sparkled with fun. I could feel his mouth grin against mine and on his face I could see a hungry desire that matched my own.

With all parts of our body still in contact, our mouths, our stomachs, our legs mingled, his top one between mine. Something inside me, at a subconscious level, reacted and I thought about how nice it would be to see and touch without any clothes in the way. A response as natural as blinking and breathing.

With one hand reaching up to touch Joe's face, I wasn't aware that my hand slipped up under his shirt until I could feel skin against my fingertips, shocking and exciting. Both. His flat hard stomach. I ran my hand over his skin toward his chest, soft skin and hair over firm muscles.

At the same time, my whole body was responding to him, my heart was racing, and my breath became labored. I pulled my lips away from his, but I didn't want my lips to leave the surface of his face. He must've felt the same as we drew away from each other, remaining close enough to inhale each other's breath and if either of us were to speak, the words would be delivered into each other's mouths.

I had been only faintly aware that Joe also had his hands on me, over the surface of my clothes, but I became very aware of his hand as it slipped over my crotch.

Joe's hand is feeling my bulge, OMG!

Suddenly and rather quickly this shifted to a whole new plane of exploration.

I had been ecstatic about the kissing, but my dick was back in the game with a whole different agenda. And I would bet Joe was willing to share this plan. I didn't want to be a copycat, but Joe had started something that I wanted to do, too. My hand moved to his crotch, fast. Even through his clothes, I could feel a long, thick cock. Our tongues were still dancing, his eyes looking into mine.

On my fucking god! I had just stepped up and leaped off the top of the scale of the how-fucking-horny-are-you meter.

It was great to put my hands on the area, and Joe was of like mind. "Maybe we could get rid of these?" His fingers tapped at the fly of my jeans to accompany his words.

"Yeah." Too fucking right!

He needed no more encouragement. I was pleased to see he was as enthusiastic as I was. He sat up before I could blink, and so I sat up too. Joe pulled his T-shirt over his head. His hands then went to his belt. With it half undone he looked at me as if wondering why I was just sitting there doing nothing.

"Sorry," I said. "I hope you don't mind me watching you. This is the fucking sexiest thing I've ever seen, and you look fucking hot."

He got off the bed and stood beside it. Had I said the wrong thing? He pulled down his jeans, which gave me a far better view of the bulge that tented his black underwear and he rubbed his hand over his covered cock. I'd obviously said the right thing.

"Your clothes need to come off too."

"Yes, sir!"

Remaining on the bed, I tugged my top over my head and dropped it over the side of the bed and then undid my belt and jeans and wiggled out of them. As I finally pulled my socks off Joe rejoined me on the bed.

Still in our underpants we lay back, on our sides, facing each other and Joe made the first move. His hand slipped under the waistband and wrapped around my cock.

I had to tell him. "Joe." My voice was strained. "I'm so close to coming. I'm sorry."

He held my cock firmly at its base with one hand and with the other pulled down my underwear. He then let go altogether to remove his own.

This may have been my first time but I knew big when I saw it. Who would think the posh boy across the road, the one who read all the books and played the piano, would also be hung like a porn star? I liked how it looked, that thick, hard cock, unleashed and pointing toward me. Joe may have been blessed with talents and sizable assets, but right then I was the luckiest young gay boy experiencing his first time.

I reached out, eager to hold and feel his dick. And it felt thick and heavy in my hand in comparison to how I knew my own.

He straddled me, as I had him earlier but stayed upright as I lay back. I kept my hand on his cock, touching, exploring and rubbing it, in the same way I liked to do it to my own. Joe's eyes were dark and heavy-lidded. His face a picture of arousal. Thankfully, for a few minutes, he made no attempt to touch me, taking heed of my warning.

But this was the most erotic experience of my life. His cock was so close to mine. As I touched his I was careful to avoid my own because I didn't need any more stimulation.

Joe opened his eyes and looked down at me. "I want to see it. See you come. Come together."

He took my hand from his dick, took both of my hands in his and brought them up next to my head as he moved forward to kiss me. I couldn't help but focus on our hard dicks pressed together. Squashed between us. I was moaning, panting into his mouth. Kissing was impossible. Joe obviously realized this, and he sat upright again. I watched him take both our cocks in one hand, rubbing his hand up and down them together.

I couldn't take my eyes of the vision of our cocks, mine, and his, hard, fucking pushing into his hand. The pressure was just right. A tight squeeze. I heard a loud moan, almost a scream, I think it came from me. With difficulty I kept my eyes open, feasting on the vision of our cocks, as I shot my fucking load in the most powerful climax. An orgasm that could cause earthquakes.

Somehow I managed to keep my eyes open with great difficulty and not miss a moment of this. My first time with another man.

Joe then sat up on his knees with one hand still around my spent, sated dick. With the other he touched himself for just a few more strokes before his cum squirted out, splashing over my stomach, covering my first coating of cum with a second.

A new best moment in the history of moments!

When I took my eyes off the amazing view of our two dicks coming one after the other and looked up at Joe, he had the biggest Cheshire cat grin on his face. And then he bounded off to the other side of his double bed and picked something off the floor, a roll of paper towel.

Prepared!

I didn't move. As I lay there Joe mopped up the mess. What happens next? I thought perhaps kissing, cuddling and then maybe more. I'd be ready for more pretty quickly.

There was none of that.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Are you hungry?"

Joe sat on the edge of the bed, not touching me.

My body craved more of the physical contact we'd had. Even though I had come it wasn't all about the orgasm. Not for me, anyway.

Food? It wasn't the first thing on my mind, but now he mentioned it I wasn't sure I could go there.

"I've eaten," I said. "What did you have in mind?"

The speed with which he was pulling his clothes on, with his back to me must have caused the sinking feeling in my stomach. I grabbed my clothes too, not wanting to be the only one left naked.

"I'm starving," Joe said. "I don't remember when I last ate."

My jeans and top in place and I sat on the edge of Joe's bed about to pull on my socks when he sat down next to me. He took my face into his two hands, forcing me to look at him and away from my feet.

"I hope that was okay for you. I couldn't eat all day after thinking about you and what happened yesterday."

The unpleasant feeling lifted. Is that the effect this man is going to have on me?

"Tell me, Aaron." He persisted. "Is everything okay?"

"Fuck yeah, Joe. As long as you want to do stuff like that, everything's terrific." Have I laid too many cards on the table too quickly?

Joe kissed me gently on the lips

"I've got to eat, Aaron, my stomach is about to rumble like a volcano. I want do stuff like that again with you. I thought that was clear yesterday."

He let me go and stood up so I went back to my footwear.

"Aaron," Joe said and I looked up at him, he appeared a little hesitant. "We've known each other for years, but I only found out yesterday that you're gay, and you seem to be into me as I am into you." He looked at me but pointed to the bed. I thought he was going to say more.

"Let's go eat." He turned and walked toward the door.

I was left wondering what else he wanted to say. But I didn't ask in the same way that I was unable to tell him everything.

Following Joe down stairs, it occurred to me that I might now have to face the parents, knowing what I'd just done above their heads

with their only son.

The kitchen was empty, no sign of anyone else in the house, no sounds from another room. Only a pile of dirty dishes, plates and cups next to the sink above the dishwasher, signaled that a family used this kitchen.

Joe walked directly to the freezer and flung open the door. "What do you fancy?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure I could eat, but I could do with a drink." I went and sat at the table in the center of the room where I had eaten many times before.

He pulled out a packet, a frozen ready made meal. "I'll have this. It takes minutes. And I can't wait."

I watched him move across the kitchen, place his meal in the microwave and program it. I watched him like I watched no other men. I always have. There was something elegant about the way Joe moved. Something so attractive about this man. I'd always been aware of it.

He turned, walked over to the table and standing in front of me across the table he placed his palms down flat.

"Now drinks. What do you fancy?" he asked.

"Anything."

He walked off to the fridge and came back with a couple of cans of coke.

"Sugar-free and caffeine free." He shrugged. "Parents are doctors, what can I say."

I stood up and collected glasses from the cupboard, same place they'd always been. Meanwhile, he crunched into an apple from the fruit bowl in the center of the table.

"An apple a day keeps the doctors away," I said.

"I think I've overdosed. I'm definitely on more than one a day."

I sat down and drank my coke, all the time my eyes fixed on Joe, and he steadily looked back at me while eating his apple. I don't think I'd be so comfortable maintaining eye contact without speaking if it were with any other person. I felt a pleasant intimacy between us.

When the fruit was eaten, he dropped the core on the table and stood up, walked over to the microwave. As if watching the digital indicator countdown might make it go faster. Not looking at me he said, "When I asked what you fancy, the correct answer would have been me."

"I thought you already knew that," I replied. I would have been more comfortable with some jovial banter. However, perhaps Joe felt as insecure as I did and this was a time for serious conversation. The ping of the microwave interrupted. That was a fast food meal, faster than frozen pizza.

Joe carried the plastic container back to the table, and then collected cutlery and a plate. I watched him empty the food over the plate. He ate hungrily; he wasn't kidding about that.

After a few mouthfuls he spoke. "It never crossed my mind that you were gay. You caught me by surprise yesterday, coming out like that."

"I hoped you were," I said.

"You really fancy me don't you?" he said.

Asking me to confess to my feelings like this was more terrifying than asking me to remove my pants in his bedroom with my dick hard. But if I can do that then I can give him an honest answer. "Yeah. You know, I could ask what gave it away?"

"You of all people!" Joe said. "I struggle to get my head around it. I've known you for years, and we get on well and, I've always liked you. I never thought we'd get together like this."

He shoveled more food into his mouth hungrily. If there was more to say, I'd have to wait. "I hate it when people make assumptions. But I totally assumed you were straight," he said. More food.

"I hoped you weren't," I replied.

"I already knew I liked you, and we get on well. I didn't take you upstairs for a one-off," Joe said looking a little embarrassed, his face reddened and he looked away from me.

I thought I knew what he was trying to say, though he struggled to get the words out, hiding behind his meal.

"Joe, will you do me the honor of being my boyfriend?" There that sounded good out there, that sentence out in the universe.

He looked at me and grinned. "Yeah I'd love to. And as your boyfriend, I'd like to know whether you have plans for Friday night or would you'd like to join me at the theater."

CHAPTER TWELVE

When the front door closed behind me Joe grabbed me hungrily. Pushing his whole body against me, he took me by surprise, pinning me against the back of the door in a passionate kiss.

A fantastic way to be greeted by my new boyfriend. No doubt that Joe was feeling just as horny as me. Less than twenty-four hours apart, with a whole lot of flirty instant messages exchanged, we were hungry for each other. I had seen many of my mates with girlfriends, of course, but never imagined making out felt this good. Both the kissing and the experience of being held and desired.

And did I feel desired!

His fingers held my cheeks, and I wrapped my arms around his waist. His groin ground against mine and I could feel his arousal pressing against my instant erection. I hoped his parents were out and not about to enter the hallway.

He pulled himself from me and said, "I need to get you upstairs."

"What no hello, welcome, good to see you?" I wasn't serious; I was kicking off my trainers.

"Are you complaining?"

"No! Absolutely not. Lead on, boyfriend."

I was fired up. What a greeting. And then following the vision of this tall, slender, fucking gorgeous man, my boyfriend no less, to his bedroom, I might as well drop dead right then because life couldn't get any better.

It caused physical reactions that I recognized and some emotional ones that I couldn't be doing with right then. I preferred to focus on the physical and what he might have in mind when we reached his room.

Inside his bedroom, he didn't lead me to the bed or tear my clothes off, or his own. He stood by the door and appeared somewhat bashful in contrast to the man who'd just pinned me to the back of the front door.

The music wasn't something I recognized, instrumental and foreign but pleasant enough. The curtains were drawn. Purple, blue and red lights danced from the various lava lamps positioned around the room. The chemical explosions within the multicolored lamps were a perfect boyish alternative to candles that may have seemed a little over the top romantic and feminine. Joe was very different from

me, but he wasn't girly in any way, not camp or feminine. He had nothing frilly or fluffy in his room. Not like Reza, with the sequin scarf. I could imagine him with candles and a pink and fluffy bedroom. Not that I've been in many girls' bedrooms, having only brothers and no sisters.

"This all looks nice," I said and slipped my hand around his waist.

"I couldn't stop thinking about yesterday and what happened when you were here and I hoped you would want to do the same."

"Are you kidding me?" I pulled him toward me, both my hands on his hips, my body pressed against his. Our lips brushed together. "Fuck yes." I was turned on like crazy but so nervous. I didn't want to do the wrong thing with Joe because I really liked him and I didn't want to ruin things between us.

Joe might have been eager to get me to his room and onto his bed, but we remained standing, holding each other. Our mouths locked in wet passionate kisses, tongues exploring each other's mouths. We moved gently with the music. It was not unlike how I've seen couples moving to the slow songs but I'd never done that, not with a girl and not with a guy. This was my first slow dance! Swaying to the music, it couldn't be called dancing.

His hands slowly brushed over my body, caressing each place that they touched. I held him close wondering why I'd never done this before and whether I could do it every day from now on. I guess with my boyfriend living so close, I could. I didn't want to mess this up.

This is what it's like to have a boyfriend; no wonder dating is so popular!

I touched him too, moving my hands over his clothes to everywhere that was in easy reach while not breaking the hold I had on him and the air-tight seal between us from our mouths to our crotches. Enjoying this intimacy. There was no urgency to get onto the hard-core stuff that we did yesterday. Although my cock would beg to differ; it strained inside my pants, but my brain was happy just being there with Joe. While I was happy continuing with the kissing my dick wanted more and eventually it won out.

Joe might have more experience than me; I was guessing he had experience as he'd been out for years. That didn't mean I needed to wait for him to make the first move. I pulled away to speak.

"I could do this all night."

"We can. I'm not going to kick you out."

A shiver of excitement ran up my spine. There it was again, that suggestion I could stay the night. My pulse suddenly raced so much faster.

"The thing is I can't spend the night like this, without

something happening to this swelling down here." I looked downward; we couldn't see past our chests pressed together, but I pushed my crotch against him. He knew what I meant.

"I know how to take care of that," Joe said his blue eyes flashed with a naughty wink.

"I know you do. The question is do you want to do something about it now or are you going to make me wait hours?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Joe stepped back, completely breaking our connection and the temperature in the room seemed to drop by a few degrees.

"If I knew I only had to ask I'd have done so sooner."

I reached out and hooked my hand behind his belt buckle to pull him back close to me, but not so close that I couldn't attempt to undo it while cupping his bulge with my other hand and gazing into his eyes. This all seemed so perfect in my mind, but "attempting" is the key word there. Undoing someone else's belt, facing them, is impossible.

Feeling his hard dick through his trousers was more satisfying than struggling with his chastity belt, feeling his as hard as my own and knowing I was responsible for that. I traced its shape with my fingertips.

Thankfully, Joe didn't tolerate my fumbling for long and undid his own belt, and proceeded on the fly. "This is what you had in mind, yes? I'm not going too fast?"

"No. This is a perfect speed for me." I gulped.

Normally I can get my kit off really quickly; this was not one of those times. Too eager to get on to the next event and as incompetent with my own belt as I was with Joe's. He was way ahead of me, already naked and slouched on the bed, propped up on pillows and elbows. His large dick bounced above his stomach, pointing to his face. The shy boy had left the room; a shameless, wanton sex god had possessed his body.

Joe was looking me up and down with lust filled eyes. I liked this incarnation. I liked what I saw too and if it were possible for my dick to get harder it would have, so eager was it to go and play.

Invited by an image that I'd only seen in porn, in the privacy of my room. A naked young man with his hand tentatively stroking his length. After freeing myself from my clothing, I did the same to mine, giving him something to look at.

My dick demanded more pressure, bring on the relief, but I simply ran my fingers along the underside around the end of my cock, which was dripping with precum already. I twirled it around the swollen head with my fingers and walked to the bed.

Joe sat up, looking as eager as I felt. He swung his legs over

the side and sat on the edge of the bed, and as I got closer, he reached out to take my cock in his hand.

My eyes could see what was going to happen. It unfolded in slow motion.

Oh, sweet potatoes and all that is good in the world.

Joe's head came forward, his mouth open, the tip of his tongue visible.

He licked the very end of my cock.

I wasn't sure which part of me liked it the most, my dick or my eyes.

It was a spectacular show. Joe looking up at me, the blue of his eyes almost gone, hidden by the dilated black pupils, his eyelashes fluttering. And. His tongue, circling the end of my knob, lapping up the precum as if it were sweet syrup. The tip of his tongue teasing the sensitive underside and then pressing against the opening before his lips created a tight seal and he sucked me in.

I watched my cock disappear into Joe's mouth, at a fucking snail's pace. He was totally in control and knew how to send me fucking crazy.

The sexiest guy I'd ever met with my dick in his mouth.

I loved him!

A hand curled around the base, which he let slide to cup my balls. He squeezed them gently. Still standing I moved my legs slightly wider apart to allow his fingers easier access for their exploration between my thighs.

I'd seen this kind of thing in porn and imagined it happening to me when I had fisted my hand and touched myself. However, the reality of somebody else touching me in this way was mind blowing. Not just mind blowing, cock blowing.

My hands ran through his soft blond hair. I needed to hold on to something, reality.

I pulled myself away from Joe. The lusty look on his face told me he enjoyed doing that as much as I'd enjoyed it. That I was able to pull away before coming was a surprise to me, but I might not have lasted much longer.

"This is so fucking fantastic," I said. "But I need to touch you too."

Joe lay back on the bed. I don't know what he was expecting, but I needed to know what it felt like to have a cock in my mouth and desperately wanted to taste him and make him feel so good. I think I wanted to do it even more than I wanted it done to me, but that sounds crazy.

I had gone crazy. Crazy over Joe. I knew what it felt like to come, to touch my dick, for my dick to be sucked, and I wanted Joe to

feel all those good things more than I wanted them for myself. I wanted to see him happy, to see him come and come again. My whole body ached with things I wanted for Joe. That he wouldn't spend his life alone in this big house eating oven ready meals on his own. That he'd feel loved and cared for.

Where the fuck did those thoughts come from?

"Do what you want with me, anything." Joe lay back in the middle of the bed with his hands up either side of his head.

Anything I want! Those words, what an invitation, what a responsibility.

Though lacking practical experience, of course, I'd been well trained in the arts of gay sex. Thank heavens for the internet.

One thing to know it, another to have hands-on experience, but it wasn't about experience, it was about Joe. This wasn't some anonymous drunken pick up, some casual encounter, this was Joe. My friend of many years, who I'd started to avoid in the last couple of years because when I saw him he set my heart racing. College and work, they were just excuses.

The truth was hitting me in waves. Waves that had been lapping at my ankles like the tide coming in for the past few days. The tide wasn't just in, it was a fucking huge spring tide. Giant waves threatened to knock me off my feet. Waves of realization. My feelings ran deep for Joe and they had for years. And I absolutely refused to think thoughts like this.

Aaron, pull yourself together. Just think sex.

I wanted to lick him. Not just his dick but all over. I didn't. I got half on the bed, leaning across it, my legs still hanging off the side and I gave my first blow job. Even though he was almost as tall as me, Joe had delicate features, small nose, hands and feet. His dick, however, was huge, thick and long. That might be why I couldn't swallow the whole thing like I'd seen on films. But I could do the same things as Joe, with my tongue and my hands too.

Joe looked like he was having the time of his life. He whimpered and squirmed. That was encouraging and damn hot. I loved the noises he made, hearing him catch his breath and knowing it was my fault. For my first time, I'm guessing I wasn't too bad at it. I'd like to tell him how much I loved the taste of him, the feeling of his dick in my mouth, but to speak meant stopping.

"Joe." His dick was on the edge of my lips, like a microphone.

"Aaron." My name came out as a breathy moan.

"Would you like to come in my mouth?" I licked the head of his dick, waiting for an answer.

"Hmm. Do you want that?" he asked.

"Fuck yeah, I want it. What do I have to do?"

Aaron moaned and bucked his hips slightly as if the very suggestion was sufficient. Hell, I think if he'd have said that to me I'd have come instantly.

"Just keep doing what you're doing."

I was so fucking close to coming myself, I humped his sheets with uncontrollable dick driven desire. My hand fisted his cock, while my tongue and mouth merely lingered around the end. He thrust upward and moaned.

He called my name, "Aaron, Aaron."

I felt his dick pulsating. I sucked it as deep into my mouth as I could without gagging and was rewarded with the feeling of spunk shooting to the back of my throat.

There was serious competition for the title of sexiest moments in my life and this was one of them.

Holding the root, I licked around the end of his cock until he was completely done, every last drop in my mouth. My cock was leaking like crazy. Sure I'd sucked up every last drop of his cum, I got on to the bed next to him and fisted my cock furiously. I knew this wouldn't take long and I was sure he'd happily offer up his stomach with out me having to ask.

But Joe didn't stay still. He was up on his elbows, tongue licking at the end of my dick.

"Fuck, Joe!"

He knew what was going to happen and he'd put himself there in the direct line of fire. There was nothing I could do to save him. My spunk shot out over his face. My eyes shut and I bloody well forced them open to see this. A stream of white cum streaked across his face from just below his right eye, across his cheek and lips. The next spurt hit his lips and some entered this mouth. He licked his lips drawing more of my jizz into his mouth like it was the best tasting cream.

The vision itself was such a turn on. I'd fuckin' come, but still wanted to grab his cum-covered face and fuck his mouth hard. Luckily, my new boyfriend is a mind reader. He sucked my cock into to his mouth right then and sucked the last throws of orgasm and the remaining seed from my body.

If I didn't already love him, this would've sealed it.

I sat back on the edge of the bed, overwhelmed by all that had happened from the time I'd taken my clothes off to right then, sitting back on the bed.

Joe wasn't finished with doing my head in. With one finger he wiped the strand of jizz from his chin and put it in his mouth, sucking his finger clean. He did it again to another strand and another. All the time his eyes locked with mine. This show was for me. I didn't take my eyes off him and my hand was on my cock, which was making for

a record recovery.

"I'll go wash my face."

Joe's words snapped me out of the trance.

"No, wait!" I leaned forward and kissed him. My tongue entering his mouth eager to taste him mingled with my output. Some unconscious instinct took over and drove me to lick his lips, his chin, his entire sexy face.

Somehow, we moved to a lying down position and the exploration by taste, tongue and mouth continued until we were both hard again and panting. For a couple of hours, Tuesday night turned into a delicious horny cover-me-in-cum feast.

It was time to leave, but Joe dragged me into his bathroom first. Yes, his own bathroom. And we showered together. This was in no way a sexy, rubbing the soap into each other, sort of shower. We were so sweaty and smelly and exhausted and fucked and just needed to get clean.

I collapsed back on to Joe's bed, clean for the first time in hours, my skin still damp from the shower. Joe lay down next to me and snugged up forcing my arm around his shoulder. I knew I should get dressed and leave, but the desire to stay close to Joe for just a little longer was stronger.

"Joe!"

The sound of his name suddenly called immediately outside his door was a shock. But not as much as the fact that the handle turned. I could hear the clicking of the catch. And saw the door opening. As one, we kicked the duvet from beneath us trying to dive for cover.

"Mom, I'm naked!" Joe called out.

"It's okay; I'm a doctor." There was humor in the tone, but as I looked toward the door I could see it stopped opening. It was still ajar but no one was entering, and it wasn't opening any wider.

"It's not okay. Mom, I'm not alone."

"Sorry. Speak to you later," she said, and the bedroom door closed.

I was surprised by Joe's announcement. If it were my room I might have tried to cover it all up, then sneaked my boyfriend out of a window or into a cupboard or something. Joe was boldly saying to his mom he was naked with somebody else.

But if his mom had've taken one step inside she'd have discovered it for herself. In fact, it was a wonder she hadn't heard us. And later, when I go downstairs, his mom will know it was me.

I didn't mind Joe knowing that I was gay. It kind of made sense he should know with the things we were doing, but his parents? These were the neighbors who lived across the road from my parents. Should they really be among the first to know? I had to leave the

house soon.

I'd see his parents on the way out, and they'd know it was me in bed with their son.

And if I spoke, I'd have cum-breath.

I didn't think about it too much, I was distracted, I was in bed with Joe. Naked. And tired.

"That was close," I said.

"This is nice," he replied.

My eyes were shutting, my body was shutting down.

"I'll set the alarm," I heard him say.

I felt him reach out, presumably to do as he said.

"What time?" he asked.

"Six."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I didn't intend to wake up in Joe's bed on Wednesday morning. I'd fully intended to go home. But we'd cuddled and fallen asleep in each other's arms after prudently setting an early alarm clock. I usually left for work any time after 7 a.m. so I always got up early.

In an unfamiliar bed with a warm man beside me, I awoke early and horny. He was naked; of course, I was horny. I explored his sleeping body with my hands, not intending to take advantage of his vulnerable unconsciousness but hoping to wake him up. I couldn't resist touching him. He was so damn attractive. I kissed him too. On the lips, across his face and then moved down to nuzzle his neck. If I wasn't mistaken, he was stirring. I stroked my hand across his abs to discover his morning wood and he let out a small moan.

"Good morning," I whispered and then nibbled at his throat.

"Hmmm. What time is it?" He didn't open his eyes.

"Time for this," I replied. And stroked my hand too gently along the length of his cock. The alternative answer, before 6 a.m., would almost certainly not have received such a welcome response.

I moved down the bed. If I wasn't going to see him again until Friday, I wanted another memory of the taste of his cock filling my mouth to keep on file until then.

Wednesdays I go directly to football practice from work so I didn't make any plans to see Joe that evening, and on Thursdays, he does voluntary work with an LGBT youth group.

Difficult to believe how my life had transformed over a few days, since the last time I met up with the football team on Sunday morning. I'd become a man who had a boyfriend and spent the night with him. I didn't think I'd tell the team any of that, of course, not just yet.

They might guess at some of it because I knew I had it bad for Joe. I knew I had that smitten look on my face. The blokes at work commented on it. Although the frequent text messages might have been the real thing that gave it away.

Sean knew, too. You couldn’t go home after a night of passion with the sexy guy of your dreams to share a bedroom with your older brother without that older brother catching on.

Of course, they all assumed it was a woman. I confirmed nothing, so the blokes at work guessed she was married. Why else keep her a secret? The fun started when they speculated over whose

wife I was seeing.

And fucking hell, I found something better than football. Waking up to a morning blow job. The football team would understand that. I'm not sure they'd appreciate how fucktastic it feels if the BJ happens after you've just blown a guy and can still taste his cum in your mouth.

This Wednesday was also a day of firsts. The first day I woke up with my boyfriend, the first day to start with the giving a blowjob and receiving of a BJ. And the first time I met either of the doctors since I'd started kissing their son.

At 6.30, I hoped to steal across the street to my home without anyone in my house noticing where I'd come from. Joe came downstairs with me even though he didn't need to leave the house for hours. I was slipping my shoes on when his mum emerged from the kitchen.

"Morning, Aaron," she said and continued upstairs.

I looked at Joe with my eyes wide he looked back at me with a smug grin on his face.

"She knows about me?" I said after I heard a door upstairs close.

"Of course. I told her. Don't you think she'd wanted to know? After all, she almost walked in on us yesterday."

"Do you think she'll say anything?"

Joe's face scrunched slightly in confusion.

"To my family. They don't know."

"I'm sure she won't say anything. But you're going to tell them, right?"

"Yeah. But I think they should hear it from me first."

"Definitely," he agreed.

By the time I was on my way home from work, dropped off at the top of my road by my boss, as I didn't take my van every day, I was wondering if it was too late to change plans for the evening. Wednesday nights are football practice, but I regretted telling Joe I couldn't see him. It seemed like a good idea at the time. A night off, football practice, a drink with the lads, and an early night.

What on earth was I thinking?

After spending the last three evenings in a row with Joe, the prospect of hanging out with a bunch of straight guys just didn't compare. They may be mates, but not in the same league of good company as Joe. For once, going to football training seemed the poorer option.

I had a few minutes to regret missing Joe especially as we weren't seeing each other until Friday. Friday night when we really were going out. My first ever date. It crossed my mind that I should

feel nervous and perhaps I would when Friday arrived but at the moment I was just looking forward to it.

Football training was a mixture of fun concentration and running. One hell of a lot of running. Did we usually run that much?

Back in the locker room, we got changed, a few of us ready to hit the pub. Just one drink, not a big night out as we all had work the next day. Quite a few of the blokes went straight home after football practice; home to wives and families, having not had time to go home before but coming straight from work.

"Are you coming to the Horse for a drink, Aaron?" asked Pete. "Or have you got better things to do these days?" He nudged Tom, and they chuckled like schoolboys.

"Yes, I'm coming."

"Is that what you said on Sunday?" The laughter got more raucous. Dean and a few other blokes joined in.

For a moment, I struggled to recall what happened on Sunday. No, I didn't say anything like that, not on Sunday.

That line of conversation ended for a while as the lads split into small groups talking about work and sport. We walked along the street to our nearby local, The Flying Horse. Some of the locals insisted on continuing to call it by its former name, The Headless Horseman, even though it had been a Flying Horse for more than a decade.

Settled at the bar with a round of drinks, the guys turned on me again.

"Aaron, tell us about your date from Sunday." Dean led this assault. "Was she worth missing out on lunch with your mates?"

I knew I shouldn't go there, but I did, "Absolutely," I replied.

That got a chorus of envious whoops and oos. Everyone in the bar was in on this conversation.

"So let's see her then, mate."

"I've not got a picture." *Not of a girl.*

Only a few hours earlier he'd sent me a picture of his bed covered in books, not him, just books. And I'd replied with a pic of my toolbox. Literally, just my tool box.

He then sent a pic of a lunch box, so I replied with a picture of a banana.

None of them were Not Safe For Work but they were still private.

"Don't give us that. It's the twenty-first century. If you haven't got a picture of her on your phone, then you've not seeing a bird. Fact!"

"Fine," I replied. "I'm not seeing a bird. Fact. That's all you lot are getting from me."

"Come on, Aaron, show us." They apparently didn't believe me, though I spoke the truth.

It quickly transformed into a chant of "Show and tell, show and tell, show and tell."

There was no way they were ready for this.

I was giving nothing, so the guys moved on to rib someone else.

I had already said too much. If I said nothing more they might drop it and may even figure she was a figment of my imagination. I didn't want to pretend Joe was a girlfriend; he was all man to me. But I was not ready to come out.

Dean and Tim started talking about their women. Dean was a charmer and girls fell all over him, but he'd been dating someone for two years and was planning to treat her for the second anniversary of their first kiss. He said it was a kiss.

Compared to the other guys of our age who struggled to keep a girlfriend longer than three weeks and pretended they didn't care, even though we knew often they did. Dean had something the women wanted. And the guys wanted to be like him. Dean had perfect balance in his life, a long-term girlfriend who didn't in anyway prevent him from getting involved with his mates and football.

I'd met her many times and when she was around he was charming and attentive whereas when she wasn't with him he was just one of the lads.

Tim, on the other hand, was unlucky in love. Every week he chased a new girl. He had what it took to get their attention but not to keep them.

I listened to Dean with new ears this week. Although he'd been dating for only two years—he said only—he'd known her many years; they were friends first. I could identify with this.

"What are you going to do for the anniversary?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, but I'll be sure to let you know, Aaron. Because obviously, you have to start thinking about the same things if this one turns out to be a keeper. Do you think she is?"

"Stop trying to bring it back round to my love life. When I'm ready to tell you, I will."

Wednesday without seeing Joe was one thing but Thursday evening quite something else. This time, it was Joe who had other commitments with an LGBT youth group.

For me, Thursday was a day at college and the day when my mates started looking forward to the weekend. Lots of the lads went out though obviously an apprentice wage only went so far. Thank goodness for my weekend work.

Sean was home. I'd always got on well with my older brother.

We stayed in, watched TV and drank beer.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When I finished work on Friday I took my van straight to the car-wash. I sat waiting in a nearby cafe with a cup of tea while a group of men worked on it inside and out. I wanted it fit for royalty or for taking Joe to the theater. The theater! I'd been to shows and gigs, of course. But Shakespeare! That was what happened if you fell for a literature student. I wondered if he'd be as impressed when I invited him to the Plumbing and Heating Installer's Expo.

Friday and Saturday nights were typically nights out with the lads. However, my nights out, any day of the week, are tempered by the fact that I had to be alert and sober the next day. The morning after was always busy. As an apprentice who got paid peanuts, Saturday and occasional Sunday work gave an invaluable boost to my economic welfare. I earned more at the weekend, working for real money, than I did all week. Sunday mornings didn’t offer much of a lie-in either, as I was up for football. Just a lowly local amateur team. None of us were destined for professional careers. Hell, some of us were just there to make up the numbers.

For me, everything I did with a boyfriend was something new, especially Friday night at the theater. I'd enjoyed every minute with him so far.

I didn’t struggle to make excuses for my absence with my mates as I didn’t have a specific weekend routine. I had various circles of mates to meet up with, from school, from work, from football. So no one group would think it odd that I was missing. It was only absence from football that would really go noticed. At home, it was a different matter, however. Sean was hanging around like a lost pet, dropping all the hints that he wanted to come out with me. After years of spending weekends with Jesse, as part of a couple, he didn't know what to do with himself.

In the end, I had to tell him. "I'm going to the theater, and we've got tickets."

"So you have got a girlfriend?! I knew it. Out all night, Wednesday, sneaking in."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because blokes only go to the theater with girls," he replied. But then he added, "Unless they're gay." It was such a throwaway line it obviously never crossed his mind that he'd called it as it is.

"You look a bit casual for the theater."

I decided not to mention we were going to a gay bar after. Jeans, trainers, T-shirt, I felt a bit casual, but this was exactly what Joe said I should wear.

I gave the folks at home the slip so I wouldn't have to discuss the theater, or what I was wearing, or who I was going with.

I couldn't wait to see Joe. I pulled off the drive and parked on the street and then went to knock on his door. Of course, he was expecting me. I'd already texted him to say I was getting my trainers on. It was only when I left my house that I wondered how I should best go about getting my two-seater van from the drive to meet Joe from his home opposite and drive away with him. All without anyone in my house seeing because they didn't know I was meeting Joe, and it would seem very odd that I'd kept it a secret. If had a brain, I'd have thought this through and just told Sean I was out with Joe. He wouldn't have thought anything more about it. Now, I'd made it suspicious.

My stomach was churning, and I didn't quite know why, but my excitement at seeing Joe was far greater than any apprehension.

Of course, we'd been non-stop messaging each other. I sent him photographs of me at work along with silly pictures.

He'd replied with silly images of his own and suggestive messages, funny ones, nothing NSFW.

"Hopefully, we'll be in time to meet up with Reza for a drink before the show," said Joe when we were in the van.

We had barely set off and were still only at the top of my street. I thought this was a date, just the two of us, not some sort of threesome and I wasn't sure that I liked the thought of sharing Joe with Reza. I knew it was irrational, but I couldn't help feeling jealous. Was it jealousy or insecurity?

I'd known Joe for years, but I didn't know he was gay. Reza had also known Joe for years, attending the same school. And they'd shared all that school and coming out history. I admired Reza's courage and originality, but I didn't want to share Joe with him, not even as a friend.

"I didn't know he was going to be there," I said.

"I was going with Reza before we got together. But it's turned out better for all of us as now his boyfriend is coming too."

I didn't say anything for the rest of the journey, the whole of that ten-minute journey from our house.

It was easy to park in the streets around the theater as we were very early for the show, so we went in. Joe had to pick up the tickets, so I hit the bar to get us a couple of drinks. Orange juice for me, sparkling water for Joe, what a pair of health freaks. I couldn't drink and drive but Joe also wanted to keep a clear head.

I got the drinks and waited for Joe in the bar area while he collected the tickets. We were early enough to nab a table, and I sat watching the crowd. I wondered if we might look conspicuous, as a gay couple, after Sean's comments. Did blokes go to the theater without women?

There were loads of men without women, both in couples and groups, and guys who looked gay. No public displays of affection to confirm my suspicions but I could guess some were couples by the way they stood together, too close, or looked at each other. The exchanges and body language indicated some of the guys were probably married, same-sex couples with years of history. These men looked at each other in the same way my mom and dad looked when they were together, familiar and comfortable.

It's not something I had given much thought to before. I hadn't been out as part of a gay couple, and so I hadn't been looking for other gay couples.

Suddenly I was snatched from my daydreaming as Joe appeared at the table along with two other men.

"This is Aaron," Joe announced to his friends. "You met Reza last week; this is his boyfriend, Rob."

If Reza looked like the absolute archetypal stereotypical gay man—what was he wearing—his boyfriend was most definitely not. The very last man you'd think was queer. Built like a fridge, and I'm talking double sized American fridge. The sort with a freezer on the side that makes ice cubes and dispenses chilled water.

I knew better but a part of my brain said, there is no way that dude is gay.

I stood up and shook hands with the boyfriend. "Hi, Rob."

Reza and Joe sat down while Rob went off to the bar for drinks.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The gay club was just a short walk from the theater. I had never been in a gay bar before, though I had often walked past The Bad Apple, making deliberate detours to take me past it. I knew what it was. A well-known and long-established gay bar and nightclub. The ground floor bar was open daytimes and free to get in. I wanted to go there and meet guys like me, but I always found a reason not to. Life was too busy. And ever since my eighteenth birthday opened up the possibility of legally buying drinks in bars, I'd had a crush on a guy in my street, so picking up strangers in gay bars remained a pleasant fantasy.

When we arrived outside The Bad Apple, Rob spoke to the doorman who ushered us inside without checking our ID.

"We come here often," Joe said in my ear by way of explanation. "The staff know us."

Bustling with people, guys and girls of all ages, the ground floor bar was noisy with the sound of glass clinking and loud chattering over the top of pop music. At first glance, the inside of the Bad Apple was just like any bar I'd usually go to on a weekend with my mates. When I looked around for a little longer, I could pick out the differences. Unlike the bars I went in with mates I'd known from school or construction workers, here there were gay and lesbian couples who weren't hiding that fact. You could see they were together from their stance, or the way they touched or looked at each other. Just like the straight couples in other bars.

It was standing room only and too loud for comfortable conversation. Shortly after we got our drinks, Reza and Rob disappeared into the crowd and Joe slipped his hand around my waist as he spoke into my ear. Without getting that close, it would have been hard to hear.

"So you've not been here before?" Joe asked his hand on my shoulder leaning into me; I could feel his breath against my ear.

"No. Never. I've already told you I've never been to a gay bar," I replied.

"Is it okay? Are you okay?" he asked his lips brushed against my cheek, and I loved that he was concerned about my well-being. "We don't have to stay if you don’t want to." I felt relaxed and not self-conscious about my boyfriend touching me. Because it was all right here and nobody gave a damn.

I nodded. "I want to stay." I tightened my grip on him briefly and planted a kiss on his lips. Okay? I was elated. Out, with the guy of my dreams as my boyfriend. I couldn't tell him just how good things were for me right then.

"Reza and Rob have gone downstairs; it won't be so busy there this early. Plenty of space on the dance floor."

"Most of the blokes I normally hang out with don't dance." Joe looked at me a little strangely, was that an odd thing to say? "It's true, we'd go to places with great beats, and they'd just prop up the bar or stand at the edge and watch the fun instead of taking part."

"Do you want to go dance?"

"Yeah. Lead the way." I did want to dance, the rhythm of the music and the great atmosphere in this bar made it impossible to stand still.

The dark disco area downstairs had a different vibe, with flashing lights and an over-powerful smoke machine adding to the atmosphere. A crowd of guys and girls were doing their thing to the tunes, but there was still plenty of space. Reza and Rob looked good together even with their significant height difference. Rob looked like even more of a giant when close to the petite Indian man. Strutting and showboating as if their routines were choreographed and rehearsed in the bedroom.

The deep bass line reverberated through my bones propelling us from the edge of the room to the center of the dance floor in no time as if the Pied Piper of Hamelin was in the DJ booth.

I lost track of time. Joe and I danced closer to each other. I could not say exactly who moved closer to whom or whether we were just drawn together. Together, bumping and grinding, sometimes face-to-face, one arm around each other squeezing each other's butts, and oblivious to those around us. Then we'd let go of each other, do solo moves. Then he was behind me with a hand on the flat of my stomach. I could feel his crotch pressed against my ass. We were still dancing! It was sexy and fun. I'd never had such a good time moving my body to music in a public place, and I loved it.

I loved him.

When the beat changed, and we were facing each other, I pulled him close to me and kissed him. A proper kiss. The first proper kiss of the night, which meant the first time our tongues had met since Wednesday morning. How had we been so restrained? Lips apart we fused together on the dance floor, and a part of me wished we were at home in the bedroom. In private. Another part of me simply enjoyed this, being together kissing, dancing, great music and a crowd around us who couldn't care less. Many of whom were doing the same, just being ourselves with the people we liked.

Our Friday night activity in public was very tame. Only the same kissing and touching that I'd seen my straight friends frequently do with their girlfriends. Nevertheless, I was pleased that we could relax and be ourselves without fear of disapproval or comments from other people, and still we maintained decorum, keeping our behavior within the bounds of public decency.

There was no way Joe or I intended to stay at the club until it closed at ridiculous o'clock. We had Saturday commitments, and so, it seemed, did Reza and Rob. We retrieved our coats from the cloakroom where Rob got involved in a big conversation with someone he knew. So the three of us went ahead, to wait outside in the cool night air.

Joe took my hand as we stepped out of the club and walked along the street just about ten yards clear of the entrance.

We waited, and Reza and Joe shifted about in uncomfortable silence, looking at the ground but also cautiously monitoring the situation across the street where a crowd of rowdy lads were arguing among themselves and shouting. Or so I thought at first. It took me a while to notice their venom was directed at us, total strangers.

Unpleasant comments about sexual acts were hurled across the street at us as abuse. Ironically, activities that I'd never done and didn't know if Joe had. Things that some of my mates seemed particularly keen to try with their girlfriends.

Of course, we didn't know whether their words were going to be followed by a physical assault.

Rage surged inside me. There were four of them. I wasn't going to take them all on my own. And even if I could, I wasn't prepared to risk my future with a potential criminal record for street fighting. But I was close to losing it. How fucking dare they.

Suddenly the guys fell silent, slapped each other on the shoulders and walked off. So totally had I focused on our abusers that I hadn't seen Rob join us along with two other guys who were at least as large as him if not bigger.

If it weren't for the fact that we were still holding hands, and we'd just walked out of a gay bar, I didn’t think Joe and I would have attracted that sort of attention. Reza, on the other hand, was slight, colorful and feminine. Camp, I guess. I was pleased, for Reza's sake and safety, that opposites attracted and he had Rob to look after him and scare off the bad guys.

If I was unsure about public displays of affection, Rob already had his arm around Reza holding him close. Rob didn't appear riled, angry or intimidated by those cretins from across the street. He just gazed at Reza like he was the most beautiful person to walk the planet.

Do I look at Joe like that? I think so but can everyone else see

it?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The short drive home passed in silence.

Whatever Joe was thinking, I was certain it wasn't the same thing that was on my mind. I pulled over into a lay-by, off the main road near the junction with our street. I tugged on the handbrake, turned the engine off but left the lights on, and I turned in my seat to look at Joe.

"Have you forgotten where we live because I can give you directions," he said.

"Hey, that's handy because this old van hasn't got GPS."

He rested a hand on my thigh. A distracting hand. "What's up? Is, is it those guys? They're dickheads, don't let them spoil the evening."

"They're almost forgotten. No, it's not that." I placed a hand on top of his. Not sure how to say what needed saying.

"I've pulled over here because I didn't want to say goodbye to you outside my parents house."

"So you expect me to get out now?" He looked surprised.

"No! I didn't mean that," I said. "I just didn't want to linger outside where somebody might see us." *And I want to kiss you.* Why can't I say that? Instead, I said, "It was an amazing night I've really enjoyed myself, and it's been an incredible week." *Because of all the kissing, obviously*.

"So you liked the club then?" He was smiling and relaxed.

"Yes. I liked the club, especially the company. Dancing with my hot dance partner. And I just wanted you to know all that before we, you know, part for the night."

"So, what you're saying is you had a great time, but that's it." He must be a mind reader. Thank God. I couldn't have put it better myself.

"Sorry, yeah." I said it too flippantly, and as soon as the words were out I saw they hit Joe like a slap, not what I'd intended.

"Oh." He bit his bottom lip; I saw the hurt on his face.

I placed my free hand on his cheek. "I can't kiss you outside my parents house when they don't know about me. But I can kiss you here. And see you again tomorrow."

"I understand," he spoke quietly.

To my great relief, Joe then undid his seat belt with his free hand and moved toward me, capturing my mouth in a kiss that was so

sensual, it was if he were making sure I was coming back for more tomorrow. That was never in question. His hand slid along my thigh to discover my swelling cock.

Yes, I get hard every time we kiss like this. Joe, don't doubt I want you so bad.

Joe was all over me. It wasn't quite a two-seater sofa, and we were fully dressed, but pretty quickly things ramped up to hot and getting hotter. Is that what Joe needed as thinking time? Abruptly he got off me, sat back in his seat and said, "Okay, to be honest, I am disappointed, but I do understand. Perhaps we could catch up with the kissing tomorrow, if you'd like to meet up in town after work. I've got the theater club in the afternoon. And then perhaps we could do the same thing again?"

If it was a question, there was no way I was going to say no. I wanted us to spend all our free time together.

"Yes. That would be great."

My house was in darkness; everyone was asleep including Sean in my bedroom, so I just stripped off my clothes in the dark and climbed into my bed naked and tired. My mind was buzzing from what was mostly a great night, and if it weren't so late, I'd have finished the evening with something to help me sleep. I thought I was tired enough without that.

But my mind wouldn't quieten down.

A night out with Joe was the best night out ever. W.T.F. had I been missing these last couple of years? I thought I had fun with my mates, but Joe was funny, intelligent, interesting, charming, great company in a different league. I'd always known this. A new revelation was dawning on me, in the way these things do when you know you need to go to sleep. Spending time with him reminded me of why I liked him. I'd been crushing on him not for his cute looks but because of how I'd always felt so good in his company.

The sexy way he wiggled when he danced, the delicious taste of him when we kissed and the dick-stirring sounds he made when he came were just a bonus. Oh, fuck. I shouldn't think of Joe coming. My dick was hard and wet, with my hand on it. Joe was just across the street, and I was sure he wanted this, together. Why was I here alone in my bed, with my brother on the floor? This was crazy. And Joe deserved better. Joe deserved somebody who was willing to take him to his door and kiss him good night, not be embarrassed to be seen with him. I disappointed him; he told me so.

I didn't want to lose him. I needed to sleep, I finished.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Joe and I spent most of our spare time together from the day after the lamp post incident. Friday and Saturday nights we'd often go to the theater and one of the town's gay bars. Meet with Reza and Rob or others of Joe's friends. I stopped driving into town so that I could avoid awkward goodbyes when we parked outside my house. We lived close enough to town to walk.

During the week, we stayed in at his house. We played games, watched films, talked, all the usual stuff. I teased him that I should share his literature qualification as I was doing half the work. Watching the films and plays and talking about them afterward. Evenings at his home also involved lots of mouth-to-mouth contact and the removal of clothes.

At home, I don't know if I was missed. I wasn't back enough to find out. Except on Thursdays. Thursday nights became a time to hang out with Sean. He seemed to catch on that my love interest was otherwise engaged on Thursdays. By the third Thursday Sean had moved out but came to our house that night with a crate of beer.

"We don't need to drink it all tonight. It's a way of saying thanks for putting up with me in your room for two weeks."

The following night was the third Friday night out for Joe and me. We left the Bad Apple early, eager as ever to get back to his place. We weren't holding hands as we walked along that same stretch of street where we encountered the verbal abuse the first time I went there.

When we turned the corner, we came face to face with my parents, Sean and younger brother, Mark. I was surprised to see them, of course, and they looked equally surprised to see me.

"I didn't expect to run into you boys. Hello, Joe." My dad spoke first.

"What are you doing around here?" I asked my gaze shifting between each of them Sean, Mark, my mom and dad. I didn't look at Joe, but he seemed to have stepped back a little from this family reunion.

"We're just on our way home. Sean took us out to dinner," Mum replied.

"By way of thank you for free bed and board when I needed it," Sean added.

"Sean should be taking me out to dinner," I said. "I'm the one

who put up with him in my bedroom." And I gave him a friendly punch to the chest.

"Bro, I bought you beers on your night off. I didn't want to intrude on you and your girlfriend at the weekend."

With Joe standing near, my blood ran cold at these words. And the shame of it didn't stop there.

"So where is she tonight? I thought you were out with her again?"

Sean, please stop talking.

Dad looked at Joe. "Have you met her, Joe? He is out with this mysterious girlfriend almost every night."

I couldn't bring myself to look at Joe I didn't know where to look and simply wanted to run from the situation.

"No." It wasn't a voice I knew but one that was icy cold. "I have not met his *girlfriend*." A particularly unpleasant emphasis on the word girl, which my family may not have noticed although it was evident to me.

"We are going home now. Do you boys want a lift?" asked Mom.

Don't say yes, I prayed to Joe, please don't say yes.

"No, we're not going home yet," I said, praying that he wouldn't contradict me.

After a few more exchanges my parents continued their way to the car-park. Without speaking to me or acknowledging me in any way, Joe walked swiftly in the direction of home.

No one had died, but this was a tragedy, you know that's the correct use of the word when you date a literature student. I felt my heart breaking, as the man I loved walked away from me. I heard what he heard, and it sounded terrible I could understand how hurt he must feel.

I couldn't do anything about it while my family were still in sight.

I followed Joe at a steady pace. All the time the distance between us was growing, but I did not break into a run until my family disappeared out of sight.

Whatever was propelling Joe forward at such great speed was no match for my weeks and years of football training. I could run miles, and would run miles for him.

"Joe," I called out, "Joe, wait."

He didn't wait, and he did not turn to look at me. I kept running. When I reached him, I caught hold of his arm, and he swung round to face me. His face was pale, his jaw set firm but worse, his sparkling tear-filled eyes.

"Joe, I'm sorry."

“You have a girlfriend,” he said his eyebrows lifting in wonderment.

“You know I don't have a girlfriend. I've got you. You're my girlfriend. Fuck. I didn't mean that. I mean, when I'm with you, they think, they think, I've got a girlfriend.”

“You told them that?” The sound of his voice scared me. This wasn't the same man I knew.

“I never told them that, Joe. I've never told them anything; they just assumed because I've been out so much. They've just assumed.” I hoped I’d said enough.

“And, of course, you haven't corrected them.”

“No,” I admitted. My hand was still on his arm, I slipped it down to take his hand, but he pulled away.

“How long have you known you’re gay, Aaron?”

“Always,” I said shaking my head not understanding the relevance of this question.

“I could understand the thing with your parents if you’d been seeing girls and had just made a discovery about your sexuality. But you haven’t. You've known for years. I can't handle this, Aaron.” He raked his hand through his hair and looked angry. “If I’m going to have a boyfriend I’m not keeping it a secret. In this day and age, there's no reason for it.”

There was a reason. In my crazy mixed up mind, there was a reason. I thought he understood, but I obviously had to tell him.

“Joe, it's easy for you. You've been out for years. Your parents know. Your school knew. You had gay friends at school, and now you’re at university with LGBT societies.” I was on a roll. “You go to some gay group, and mix with gay youth, and read gay books, and see gay plays, with gays in the audience at the theater. You go to gay bars where everybody knows you. It’s easy for you,” I said. “With parents who are wealthy enough to support you to do all that without you having to work.”

If he looked angry before he was positively fuming, but I hadn’t finished. I was in my stride. I raised my hand to count off the points that I was about to make on my fingers.

“In my life, Joe, there were no gay people in my school.” I put out my thumb.

“There are no gay men at construction college where I go every Thursday.” I put out a finger.

“I don't know any out gay men in construction.” That was finger number three.

“There are no gay men on my football team and, as far as I know, there are no gay amateur football players in any of the teams that we play against.”

“Have you got any idea how terrifying that is?”

I was so wrapped up in my own life, I thought all of this would be obvious to Joe, and he'd throw his arms around me in support. He didn't, he looked at me coldly his jaw even more firmly set in grim determination.

“I don't know what decade or century or country you are living in, Aaron. But it's not the same one as me. My upbringing has been different to yours, but we only live across the street, not an ocean. My life has been hard, too; you have no idea how hard. I've made difficult choices that have brought me to a better place. So for my sanity and welfare, I'm not willing to sacrifice a normal life to live in the closet like something from the 1950s. People lost their lives to bring us to where we are today, Joe. You are lucky enough to be born in a time of immense privilege.” He shook his head.

He turned and continued to walk home at the same great speed.

There was no way I was letting Joe walk away after the best three weeks my life. I ran after him again.

“Joe, I'm sorry, really, I'm so sorry. What can I do?”

I said to his back, as I followed him and he carried on walking. He didn’t respond. I kicked up a jog to get alongside him. Tears were freely running down his face, he wiped his eyes on the back of his hand and looked away from me.

“Joe, what can I do?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he croaked. “Fuck you!”

I watched him go. Stunned by his speech and by his language. Joe never swears.

I didn’t want to follow Joe or to see my family, so I turned and walked in a different direction. I walked the streets for an hour or more. Walking and hoping to drop through some fault in the universe as we know it, a crinkle that could take me back to earlier that evening so I could divert the whole car crash that kept playing over in my mind.

When I got home, the house was in darkness. I buried my head under my pillow hoping to find answers underneath.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Every time I thought of Joe a sick feeling of dread descended over me and settled like a stone in my stomach. The same feeling as when we met my family in the street and they began talking about my girlfriend. A horrible memory that my brain played over and over on a daily basis to punish me. I replayed our conversations, what Joe said to me and I'd cringe recalling what I said to him. I never wanted to experience it again. Yet I did experience it, every day when I woke up it was there. It hung heavy around my shoulders, in my stomach, dragging me down.

It took a long time to process what Joe said to me that night. I understood the words, but taking on board the meaning required some deep self-reflection. The things Joe said, the things I said to him, the look on his face went around and around in my head.

I dragged myself through work on Saturday. I struggled through football on Sunday. The ninety minutes of relief when I focused solely on the match, and my brain computed nothing else, it didn't happen. I went to the pub with the team, hoping for a distraction, because what would I be doing if I didn't go? Watching out of my window all day, hoping to catch a glimpse of Joe.

Joe didn't reply to any of my messages. And I knew the chances of running into him were pretty slim because we never use to run into each other. He left for college an hour or two after I left for work in the morning. I knew his weekly schedule. I could, of course, plan to run into him but there was something else I had to do first. I knew what I had to do. He as good as told me from the start, he told me again that night.

On Thursday, Sean turned up early in the evening, in time to share dinner with us all. Everyone was home but I wanted to talk to Sean alone.

"Sean, what about we go for a quick drink at the Oak Tree?"

"Yeah. Okay, after dinner," Sean replied.

"What about before, a quick one?" I was eager to talk to him.

Sean looked surprised at this suggestion, "I'm pretty hungry."

"Quick one, with crisps?"

Mom interrupted the exchange to tell us dinner was just five minutes away.

We all sat round the table, me, Sean, Mom, Dad and Mark. I really couldn't get through it fast enough, with the things that were in

my mind. And the prospect of eating. My stomach felt under attack, but I had to make that food disappear off the plate.

An hour later we were in the Oak Tree, a traditional British pub less than five minutes' walk from our house. With our pints, we found a table in the corner, well away from most ears.

"How's the new home working out?" I asked Sean.

"The flatmate is fine so far, a bit messy, but nothing I can't cope with." Sean gulped down a quarter of the amber liquid and then placed his glass down on a beer mat. "But that's not why you've asked me to come here. What is the matter? Problems at work?"

"Okay." I took a deep breath. "You know I've been seeing someone."

"You never confirmed it. But you haven't got her pregnant, have you?"

"There is no chance of that," I replied. "Guys can't get other guys pregnant."

Sean had picked up his pint, but he reset it on the table without taking a sip. His jaw dropped, but I saw a smile on his face underneath that surprised expression.

"Are you telling me what I think you're telling me?"

"If you think I'm telling you I'm gay, then yes. If you think I'm telling you something else, then we may have our wires crossed."

"Okay, I've got a gay brother's fantastic news. I've three brothers and with your boyfriend we could make up a five-a-side football team."

"I didn't expect you to say that," I said. In the competition for surprising your brother, I thought my announcement would win the night. But no, his response got me.

"Bro, dating boys must be a lot easier than girls. They're more like us. You can understand a man. How his mind works." He sat back in his chair, relaxed. "I'm pleased you found someone. Did you think I'd have a problem with it?"

"I didn't know what to expect. I'm not really experienced in this telling people I'm gay business, and I thought I'd practice on you."

"I'm the guinea pig! Well, I'm honored to be chosen. If you want to tell me again, for practice, I'll pretend I don't know."

I wondered if it would always be this easy. Why shouldn't it be?

"Anyway, I guess I'm not the first person you've told. This boyfriend of yours, he does know!"

My cheeks may have gone a little red at that point, thinking about Joe.

"Oh yes, he knows."

Sean glanced about the pub then leaned closer to me. "Is this a

good time to ask you all about gay sex?"

I leaned back. "No, it's not."

He picked up his pint, chuckling to himself and it occurred to me that he enjoyed watching me squirm with embarrassment.

"Some other time then, mate," Sean said, "When you've had more to drink."

"You know that I don't drink much."

"Well, maybe at Christmas I might get you an extra strong something."

I knew I shouldn't but I couldn't help myself. I moved closer to him and asked, "What is it you want to know, and why?"

He looked me in the eye with a serious expression and whispered, "Honestly, I don't know what I want to know. I just wanted to see your reaction."

We both sat back laughing.

"So who is this guy you've been seeing?"

Should I tell Sean it's over? Or that we've hit a problem? Or just confidently believe that things will get sorted.

"It's Joe, just across the road from us."

I watched Sean's face as things clicked into place.

"We saw you together, last Friday. Well, I never suspected."

Sean might not remember the conversation about my fantasy girlfriend, discussed in front of my real life boyfriend or realized its implications.

"The thing is," I said, "I need to tell Mom and Dad and Mark and Simon. I can't have everyone thinking I'm seeing girls when I'm not."

"No. I guess you're right. How do you think Mom and Dad will take it?" Sean asked.

"Really!" It came out as a high pitched squeak. "I was hoping you'd tell me. You're the older brother. I don't know how they'll react."

"Honestly, Aaron, I've got no idea." We sat in companionable silence for a while drinking.

"It can help to hope things go well but be prepared for the worst. So what's the worst thing that happened?"

"They could hate me. Disown me. Kick me out of the house."

"Disown you! We are not living in the Dark Ages. I find it hard to believe any parents are like that."

"Well, I've heard stories," I replied. "I hope Mom and Dad aren't like that, but I don't know. They've not got any gay friends. There's a lesbian who works in the plumber's merchant."

"Julie." Sean knew her too; everyone knew everyone in our trade.

“Yeah, Julie. But there are no gay men in construction, so Dad doesn't mix with gay guys at work.”

Shawn chuckled and raised his eyebrows. “No gay men in construction,” he echoed. “I was working on a big barn conversion only about a month ago, and it was all different trades on site at the same time. Chaos. Tools and stuff everywhere. The owner organized it without a project manager.”

“I remember you saying about it, nice luxury pad.”

“It’ll be amazing when it’s finished. I still got to go back for some second fixing. Anyway, the bloke had got in tradesmen who didn’t know each other, and one of them was an obnoxious loudmouth, typical know-it-all, schoolyard bully. Well, one day a pallet of tiles was delivered to site and they were in bully’s way, really, they were but these things happen. He blamed the tiler who may have been gay; I don’t know if he was. But bully was all over him with anti-gay, fag comments. It was nasty.”

“What happened?”

“He went on and on. I think they knew each other, and perhaps the tiler was gay, but he never had anything to do with where the tiles had been left by the delivery driver.”

“And the relevance is?”

“Sorry mate, not relevant at all. But what happened next is. A bricklayer on site, bricklayer, I ask you, you know what they're like. He told the bully to leave the guy alone, said his brother’s gay and there ain't nothing wrong with it.”

“That’s your story? Someone has a gay brother?”

“No, there’s more. The chief carpenter was on site when it kicked off. Most of the work on the job is carpentry right, so we are talking about the main man here. And he was a big dude in his forties with a team of blokes working for him. I’d heard of his name before but never worked with him.”

“Yes.” I wanted to urge Sean on, but I had a horrible feeling I was being set up for a joke with a groan worthy punchline.

“The strangest thing happened. He called us, all of us, to down-tools, everyone on site. You got to have big balls to do that when time is money. But he was holding his wallet in the air, I thought perhaps he might offer to buy us lunch. He got everyone’s attention. He opened his wallet and pulled out a photograph and.”

Sean paused to sip his drink. “No word of a lie. The guy told us all that the man in the picture was his husband. If he heard one homophobic comment we’d be off the site and if we had any problem with it we should go and see him.”

“Wow. Then what happened?”

“Of course, it turned out that some of the guys already knew.

But you know, loads of men spoke up, all in support of gays. If anyone had a problem, they kept quiet about it. And the bully didn't come back after that day."

"That cannot be a true story."

"As true as Jess and I splitting up, I promise you it is true. My point is, Aaron, most blokes in construction might say the wrong thing because they don't know the correct words, but you'll mostly get support. People don't care who you go home to; they care about what you do when you're at work. Are you making their jobs easier or harder."

"You're telling me that somewhere in the south of England there is a gay carpenter, a bricklayer with a gay brother, perhaps a gay tiler and I'm going to be the gay plumber."

Sean grinned back at me. "Yes. I never said there were loads of you in construction. But I'm pretty chuffed that I get to be a plumber with a gay brother."

I never thought I'd hear him say something like that; it filled me with a boost of much-needed confidence, and I'm sure he had no idea how much those words helped.

"What's the worse thing that can happen? When I tell Mom and Dad?"

"The very worse is they kick you out. I can't imagine it, but if that happened, you can always come and stay with me. I haven't got a spare bedroom, but you'd be able to stay. My flat-mate's very easy going. "Do you want me with you, when you tell them?"

"Yes, and I want to do it now."

"Another drink first?"

"No, I want to get this over with." So I can make up with Joe.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Thinking back to that Friday night when we exchanged words, I cringed when I recalled asking Joe what I should do. He'd already told me. If only I'd listened we wouldn't be on to day six of our separation.

I knew from the start, in my heart, what I had to do. I should have treated Joe with the respect he deserved. Introduced him to my parents as my boyfriend, been proud of him, told the whole world I loved him.

O.M.G.! Maybe that last one could stay on hold for a while.

If he'd lived in a different part of town, we could have pretended we were mates, and I could have stopped over at his house regularly with the excuse that I was staying at a mate's house, but that was no way to treat him. I was ashamed of the part of my brain that even thought such a thing. At least, I didn't share that lame thought with anyone.

Dad was sitting watching the TV, football, of course. Mom was moving around doing goodness knows what. She always found endless chores, things to do that didn't need doing.

"Come and sit down, Mom, I'll get you a cup of tea."

Sean may as well have just announced that something strange was up because that kind of behaviour never happened. Sean, making tea!

Mom thought so too. "What's going on Sean? What do you want?"

Sean put his finger up in the air. "Dear Mom, just sit down. I will be in with a cup for you and Dad. No arguments."

His tone was light, and he had a smile on his face putting Mom at ease. Preparing them for good news, not bad, but still my heart pounded in my chest with a considerable pile of dread. Sean took it as good news, but would they?

Mom went through to the sitting room; Sean went to the kitchen, and I didn't know what to do. I wanted to hide in the kitchen or better still behind a barricade in my bedroom. I followed Mom.

"Dad, can you pause the TV? I want to talk to you."

Sean was still in the kitchen, but I knew he could hear what was going on.

"I've been seeing somebody, and I wanted you to know from me before other people found out." This was it, don't panic.

I was about to speak again, but dad interrupted. “Don't tell me she's pregnant.” I was derailed, why was this always the first reaction and it seemed the worst-case scenario that anybody could think of?

“No Dad,” I said. “It’s nothing terrible like that. Nothing bad at all, actually. I'm seeing a man, Dad, I'm gay.”

Dad's eyes widened to the size of saucers. Then he looked back to the TV, on pause, no movement. Nevertheless, the footballers framed on the screen must have offered him something he needed. He didn't speak.

I don't know what I expected them to say. I couldn’t put myself in their position.

“Are you sure?” Mom asked.

It was a ridiculous question but if you analyse conversations, the individual words and sentences often are.

“Am I sure.” There was no way I could tell her the sexy stuff in my mind entirely revolved around cocks and firm muscles. Never a naked woman. And it always had from the start.

“Yes, Mom, I'm certain I'm one hundred percent gay.”

I looked toward my dad, still stunned by my revelation.

“You’ve never brought a girl home or mentioned a girlfriend,” said my mom. “Have you ever had a girlfriend?”

What was that about? I thought, does she think if I try it I might like it?

“No, Mom. I've never wanted a girlfriend because I'm gay.”

Sean came in with the cups on a tray; it was officially a special occasion.

“Isn't it brilliant Aaron’s finally got himself a man. About time too. Wish I could be gay as well. A relationship with a dude has got to be easier, like how I’m getting on with my new flat-mate.” Sean brought a whole different atmosphere to the room with his enthusiastic comments that made us both smile. Mom and Dad looked too stunned to smile. But Sean continued. “Women are so bloody complicated. Such hard work. Sorry, no offence, Mom, but you're the best. No other girls could live up to your high standards. No girl’s ever gonna compare to you.”

Mom smiled at Sean then turned to look at me.

“When will we get to meet him?” she asked. It was as if he’d given her permission to think of this as perfectly normal.

“I'm not sure,” I said. “Soon I hope.” I glance toward my father.

Dad stood up and left the room without saying a word and without looking at me. Seconds later we heard the front door open and close. We all remained still, in silence. Whatever I was to make of that, it can’t be good.

“Well, that didn't go as well as I'd hoped.”

“Don't worry,” Mom said. “It has just come as a surprise to your dad and me; it's not what we expected. We had never thought any of you boys were like that. You don't seem that way.”

“Seem that way? What does that mean?”

“Don’t get upset, Aaron. Mom's just being honest. She doesn't have a lot of experience in this.”

“That's right. I never knew I had a gay son. But I'm pleased you've got a boyfriend. I just want you to be happy and safe.”

Mom picked up her cup and took a sip of tea. “I thought it strange that you are good looking and outgoing but never any evidence of a girlfriend. I'm sure your dad will be happy too. He needs a little time to adjust to this new information.”

I glanced at my watch. “I’ve got to go out. I’ll be back later if Dad doesn’t change the locks.”

Mom looked shocked. “Why would you say that?”

“It happens,” I replied.

“Not here,” she said.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Thursday already, and six bunches of petrol station forecourt flowers in my hands. Dean had been one of my mates for so long; I could imagine him advising. He'd say, *Words aren't enough, show him how much he means*.

Six days I'd had to cogitate but, beyond telling my parents, I had no plan. No grand gesture prepared. Nothing.

I'd been going out of my mind with distress, missing him, wondering how things could go from so good to so bad within a few weeks and how I could win him back.

Six days apart. With each passing day, the risk of Joe moving on with his life increased. He could so easily hook up with somebody else, a guy who was out. Only by the skin of my teeth did I cling to the naive optimism that had successfully propelled me so far in this relationship. Reconciliation would happen; losing what we had together, not an option.

Joe wouldn't love the flowers but would laugh at what they stood for, hopefully.

Sean's philosophy about preparing for the worst thing that could happen wasn't going to help at this stage. There were too many bad things to contemplate, and I wouldn't know where to begin with the list.

The doctors open the front door and see me with an armful of cheap flowers; then send me away because Joe refuses to see me; he's barricaded in the safety of his room. To add to the unpleasantness my dad turns up at that moment to witness the whole disaster and evicts me from our family mansion. Actually, I could think of worse outcomes.

Of course, I knew what time Joe usually returned from the LGBT youth group, not that I'd admit to spying on him from across the street. That's creepy behavior.

Since he'd become my secret boyfriend, I had firm confirmation by way of a text message history. They told me what time he got home and when he was ready to go to sleep.

If I'd guessed correctly, he'd arrived home minutes ago, and he would open the door, not the doctors.

I knocked on his door and waited on the doorstep. There was no answer. Karma was playing mean, making a fool of me in the street where I live. I'd stand outside his house for hours if necessary. I

reached the conclusion that no one was home. Not Joe or his parents. The question remained, how long until Joe returned home.

Of all the options, waiting on the doorstep and sitting in my van were both rejected in favor of pacing up and down our street. I was too wound up for sitting and waiting.

First, I arranged the bouquets next to his front door. They were never going to impress him, but hopefully, would make him smile. It was the thought that counted.

When Joe turned the corner and came into view at the top of our road I had just begun walking in that direction, for the fourth time. I didn't falter but continued toward him, and my heart leaped with excitement.

There was time to admire the view. Tall and slender, narrow hips and broad shoulders. The street lighting accentuated all his features, the blue eyes and red lips against the pale skin. Blond hair with white highlights. He looked more gorgeous than the last time I saw him and more sexy than I remembered. That was tough because my memories of him ranged from incredibly hot to damn smutty.

He also appeared pleased to see me, his eyes locking with mine and breaking away only to look me up and down with a smile that indicated he liked what he saw.

Even at a distance, emotional as well as physical, there was a strong attraction between us. He slowed down as we neared each other.

“Hi, Joe, I've been waiting for you.”

“Have you?” he asked.

Obviously, it wasn’t a conversation for the middle of our street. I moved away so that we could walk toward his house together but he stopped where we were.

“I've come out to my parents,” I said. Joe raised his eyebrows and smiled. Without a comment, he started walking again, so I put my hand on his arm to stop him. “Haven't you got anything to say?” I asked.

“I'd like to hear all about it,” he said. “Come on.” He nodded his head in the direction of our homes and we walked down the hill together in silence. When we turned into his drive, I remembered the flowers that I'd left sitting by the door at the same time that he must've seen them.

“They’re not much,” I said. “Just a token to show I’m sorry and to let you know how much I've missed you, every day.”

I felt embarrassed and a little stupid. I looked at Joe, who stood still looking at the floral arrangement.

I'd half expected some an angry outburst, an argument, I thought I’d have to fight to get him to listen to me. In contrast, he was

the same person that I used to know before the whole embarrassing incident of last Friday night.

"Are you going to say anything?" I said feeling dead awkward.

"Inside," he replied with the key in his hand. "Come on in, Aaron, and we'll talk inside." He opened the door; I picked up the flowers. He walked into the house and went straight to the kitchen. I shut the door behind us and followed him. He stood beside the kitchen table, and I held out the six bunches of flowers.

"It's not much; you deserve more. It's just I wanted to say I'm sorry. I've missed you every day."

He took them out of my hands and put them on the table, barely acknowledging them.

"What happened with your parents?"

"Dad said nothing. Mom seems all right about it; it's just a surprise to her."

"And you've come to tell me about this? Why?"

I wanted to move toward him, take his hands or something but, despite his smile and the invitation to his house, he was not welcoming me back with joyful, open arms.

"I'm sorry, Joe. I should've told them sooner because you deserve that. I'm so lucky to have you in my life, and I'm sorry I messed up."

"So what do you want, Aaron?"

Isn't it obvious? Didn't I just say? "I want everyone to know you're my boyfriend. If you'll still be my boyfriend?"

Had I said enough?

When he didn't reply, I filled in the silence. "I'm hoping I haven't ruined it between us. This whole boyfriend thing is new to me, so I hope I'm allowed a few mistakes. And what are you smiling about?"

"I'm trying to keep a straight face," Joe replied.

"Joe, I've been going out of my mind." The words suddenly tumbled out. "Missing you like crazy and feeling terrible about what happened last week. I'm proud of you, and I was so ashamed of myself when the Bad Apple-gate incident occurred. It was awful for me, and I realized how that must've felt to you. I didn't like it. I want everyone to know you're my boyfriend."

"Everyone?"

"Well, yes. I've started with the people across the road." Small, small steps. "How have you been this week?" Steering the subject away from everyone.

"Well, it's been busy. I said goodbye to my parents this morning, and now I'm home alone for nine days."

"Where are they?"

“They’ve combined attending some big World Health conference with a holiday. I thought I might be home alone, so I'm really pleased to see you here.”

“Does that mean you'd like to be my boyfriend again?”

“About that." Joe looked away, at the flowers and then back at me. "I was hurt and angry, but I understand how it all came about. I walked away from you, but I never wanted us to split up.”

“You didn’t return my texts or answer my calls.”

“Hurt didn’t stop overnight. I’ve missed you, and I’m sorry too. I should have supported you. Coming out is a big event.”

“You did help. You pushed me to do it. And I don’t ever want you to go through that again. Standing next to me, listening to people talking about an imaginary girlfriend when you are my very real boyfriend.”

“I'm proud of my boyfriend,” he said. “He is an almost qualified professional man, with a real job. And he has a body to die for.”

“Really?”

“I want to be seen with you, really.” He held out a hand, which I took in mine. “Yes. I want all my friends to meet you and my family, not just the doctors. Well, there are more doctors once you get on to the extended family. I'm excited about telling everybody who you are. I was pretty sure that if I gave you enough time you'd turn up on my doorstep. What about your brothers?”

“I told Sean; I told him first. I've not spoken to Simon or Mark. I've not been coping with this as well as you, apparently.”

Joe walked toward me, stepped up close so that we were chest to chest and placed his hands on my shoulders. His lips brushed against mine before he sucked my top lip into his mouth, released it and entered with his tongue.

I put my hands on his slender hips and then slipped them down over his ass cheeks, pulling his groin closer to mine. If I were a cat, I’d purr with pleasure.

He’s home alone. Will he want me to stay? This, what we're doing right now, is a good sign.

He withdrew his tongue, licking around my lips as he left. “I've missed you,” he whispered. He kissed across my cheek, and I let my hand fall back giving him full access to my neck. Like a vampire, he took up my offering, not just with the playful kisses I expected; suction and teeth followed his tongue and lips. It felt great, I felt completely owned by him, although it was me pushing my crotch against his.

I wondered if he’d drawn blood when he released my sensitive skin.

“I missed you so much, Aaron,” he repeated. His breath was cooling to the heated surface of my neck. He put his hand on my face and we straightened up together, gazing into each other's eyes. “I have a few questions.”

“Shoot.”

“If I'm not playing golf on Sunday? Can I come and watch you play football?”

“The team don't know yet. And I didn't think you liked football.” *Aaron, don't be a coward, you know the correct answer.* “But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t come. You can come anywhere with me and know I’ll introduce you as my boyfriend.” *Oh fuck, how will that go down? Maybe he won't actually want to come.*

With his amazing mind reading abilities, I'm sure Joe knew exactly what I was thinking, he smirked. This was a torturous punishment, and he was enjoying it, the sadist.

“Another question.”

“Fire away.”

“I'm home alone. Are you going to stay the night?”

Was that really a question he needed an answer to? The smirk was getting bigger; he knew the answer. The connection between my ears and dick worked well. The lower part of that couple was already up for playing. The party invitation confirmed, my cock was straining to break free.

“If you'll have me, I’ll stay every night. I hate the thought of you home alone. I don't want someone breaking in and taking advantage of you.” I released his ass to brush the back of my fingers against the side of his face, and he nuzzled against it, shutting his eyes briefly.

“In that case, do you want to let your parents know you won't be home tonight, just in case they worry?”

He was so cute when he was considerate. My heart was pounding and my fingers fumbling, I wasn't sure I could get my phone out of my pocket or send a text, but I managed it.

“We'd better go straight up to bed because I guess you need the alarm set for six.”

CHAPTER TWENTYONE

I had the feeling this was going to be the best night's sleep I'd had in a long time, even if I didn't fall asleep too early.

"Lead the way," I said and glanced once at the sad flowers we'd abandoned without any water on the kitchen table.

In the hallway, we paused to remove our shoes. I placed my hand on my crotch to make vital adjustments, essential to my ability to walk and climb stairs. Then, with a second chance, the luckiest man alive followed the sexiest man alive up the stairs.

Joe drew the curtains, switched on a small lamp and left the bedroom door open.

"Home alone," he said.

We helped each other undress. I knew he wasn't fragile, but I treated his shirt as if I were removing the packaging of a delicate item. He had no idea how cherished he was, or perhaps he did. He seemed confident that I'd be back, more confident than I was that he would wait for me. My fingertips led an exploration over every inch of his skin. Surveying every mound, crevice and curve, followed by the palms of my hands. And accompanied by my mouth, lips, tongue. Needing to reacquaint myself with his body, his curves, his muscles and his strength. Longing to taste him.

When I bit into his neck too hard, which seemed fair after he had done the same to me in the kitchen, he let out a moan. The sort of loud, sexy moan that makes my dick listen. We were home alone, he could make as much noise as he liked.

"Aaron, that's…"

"That's what?" He didn't say, but I knew.

His nipples pinched between my fingers; my teeth marking his neck; my tongue tasting his sweat. I knew how all that felt.

Time to remove our pants.

However much practice one needs to master undoing another man's belt buckle and fly, I'd not reached that milestone yet. Why bother with that when there was a more efficient way of taking off our clothes?

"Everything off, Joe, now. I want you naked."

I stepped back to take off my pants. I could see his heavy-lidded eyes darkened with lust and his chest rising and falling rapidly with his panting breath. Joe was about as far gone into the realms of ecstasy as you can get without something happening to your dick.

His eyes sprung open, and his hands went to his waistband as did mine.

“I expected you to come back,” Joe whispered. “I’m so pleased to see you.”

My dick had taken complete control by this point and communicated with Joe directly. “Six days! I'd gotten used to a certain amount of physical contact. There's some catching up to do.”

Naked, his clothes simply fell away, Joe stepped closer and whispered, “I need to suck your cock, one hell of a lot.”

“So you're just after my cock then?” I teased, pulling my feet clear of garments.

“Not at all. Yes, obviously I’m after that, but not just that.”

He grabbed hold and squeezed it. My mouth went dry. “But right now we’ve got an empty house and six days to catch up on. Lie down on the bed, Aaron, because I want my boyfriend’s cum in my mouth.”

Oh fuck. That’s why I’m here. My heart couldn’t beat any faster.

I followed his instructions before he had the chance to reconsider, although I didn’t doubt Joe wanted this as bad as me. I lay on the bed with my head on his pillow and my hands behind my head. My legs were slightly apart, my hips tilted, offering myself to him. Joe didn’t join me immediately; he stood next to the bed thrusting his cock into his fist. I'd never look at porn again if I could watch this guy touching his dick every day.

“I want to hear about every dirty thought you've had since we've been apart. And don't tell me you haven't had any,” he said.

“I promise to tell you everything, but not right now, because there’s this guy who’s desperate to suck my cock.”

Joe grinned. “That guy wants to suck your cock in every room of this empty house.”

Oh, fucktastic.

“Scoot down the bed a little, bring the pillow for your head, but just move down,” he said. I wasn’t going to question his plan; I’d do anything for him. Without question, I was willing to obey his every command.

“Is this the right location for you, darling?” I sang out.

“Perfect,” he said.

I liked the way he looked at me, hungry with sexual desire. Exactly the way I felt toward him.

He got on the bed alongside me and didn't need to explain what he had in mind; it had all become excitingly self-evident. I rolled onto my side to face his cock. I wondered if I'd be able to control my breathing enough to blow him while he was doing what he was

already doing to me. I could feel his tongue licking at the end of my knob. Across the opening and flicking at the most sensitive place.

I had to focus on what was in front of me rather than what was happening to me, while I still could.

I did the same to his cock. I licked as far as my tongue would reach tasting his precum as sweet, delicious nectar, more and more oozing onto my tongue. I licked along the shaft down to his balls. Not easy when my own were sucked into his mouth. Oh my God, Joe. Only when he released me, my mind focused on taking as much of his length into my mouth as I could. Over the past few weeks, I'd become better at relaxing my jaw and controlling my gag reflex. I loved being able to do that for him but still, his porn-star proportions more than filled my face.

I always loved it when I felt him shoot his juice into the back of my throat, but I didn't want that today. There was something better I could do for him, something new to turn him on. We hadn't done lots of stuff, not yet, but there was something we hadn't done that would be just right for him. Something so fucking mind-blowingly erotic.

I wanted to give him everything tonight.

His mouth was replaced by his hand on my cock and cold air on wet flesh filled the gaps that remained uncovered by his fingers.

"Aaron, I'm so close to coming. Can you come with me, like this?"

We seriously need to perfect telepathy or Morse code or something so we can communicate with our mouths full.

"Yes, I can come. I'm having trouble holding back. There's a lot of loving here to give you. But Joe." I put my hand out to hold him back and make him listen. "But Joe, please don't swallow it all. I'd like to see it on your face."

I felt his cock straining in my hand, bobbing with pleasure as his brain registered the suggestion. He'd not said anything about it, but I'd seen how much he liked to be coated in spunk. And it was a sight that made my cock hard again very quickly. One of the favorite images of him stored in my internal memory.

We lasted longer than I expected both of us teetering on the edge of ecstasy but showing remarkable restraint controlling our climaxes. I wasn't going to come until he did and perhaps he was thinking the same.

Who set the other off with all the signs, I don't know. We came together. With my own orgasmic pleasure shooting through my body, I still concentrated on his pleasure too. I thought beyond the point of orgasm, and as Joe came in my mouth, I pulled his cock away so that he didn't shoot to the back my throat but coated the tip of my tongue

and my lips.

And, with my mouth full of his cum, I fought off the instinct to lie back and close my eyes. I turned around to meet him. He lay on his back, with white glistening wet strands of spunk across his lips and chin. His eyes open, looking at me and a smile on his lips. I went to kiss him. As I moved closer to him, I opened my mouth to show him the gift I brought. I put out my tongue so that his cum could drizzle from my mouth onto his. He opened his mouth to accept it, and I saw he was holding my cream in the same way.

As hot as fuck.

Our mouths joined with greater heat and speed than I anticipated. Tongues entwined, swirling and passing the cum cocktail between us. My cock may need a recovery period before more, but the rest of me was completely turned on by what we were doing.

We lay together, my legs bent, feet on his pillow, kissing, passing and swallowing.

We were so close together, not just physically, holding each other tight but joined on a different level, three words summed up our feelings at that moment and we voiced them.

"You're fucking perfect." *My sweet boyfriend.*

"So are you," Joe replied.

My heart ached, swelling, greater than my desire. I wasn't ready to share all my thoughts with him because four words came together as naturally as our bodies.

Joe, I love you.

The End

For Now

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Two Voices

(Two as One Book 1)

By Declan Rhodes

Getting Out

I scrunched up my face as I pounded away at the keys. It was those same four bars. I just couldn't get it right. There was a real hook in there somewhere, but I just couldn't find it.

"C'mon Daniel, let's hit the festival. It's Saturday, and I need a funnel cake, and you...well, you need to get out of the house, seriously." Antonio dug his fingertips in and tugged fiercely on my shoulder.

I was repeating the same melody line on my electronic keyboard over and over. I had been trying to work it from those four bars into a full song for the past week, and I was getting nowhere fast. Any time I had a spare moment, I was back at my keyboard in my little home studio space. The melody line haunted and tormented me. I stared up at my best friend and housemate pleading with my blue eyes. "I'm so close. I can feel it. It's right there. You know, Antonio, like when something is on the tip of your tongue."

He pulled again. "C'mon get that little blond butt out of your chair and into the shower. The bus is leaving in thirty minutes." He wasn't being literal about a bus. The festival was less than a ten minute walk away.

For his next effort, Antonio put his hands on his hips and heckled me. "And you are nowhere closer to a song out of that than you were four days ago. I've heard that so many times now I hear it in my dreams."

I pushed his hand away and stood up from the bench. "Yeah, you're probably right." I held my watch out in front of my face. "30 minutes and I'll be showered and dressed. I'll knock on the ceiling when I'm ready."

Antonio smiled, turned, and headed for the staircase to his upstairs apartment. He glanced back over his shoulder. "Look sharp, too...you never know when tall, dark, and musical might sweep you off your feet. You know I've got two of those nailed." Antonio's laughter filled the house. I couldn't help but laugh, too.

Antonio was right about his qualities. He was tall, just over six feet, skinny, and dark, too. He liked to say his skin was, "Like hot cocoa made with rich, silky dark chocolate." Unfortunately, Antonio was musically challenged to say the least. Saying he sang off key was being kind and generous. We have been close friends since we met

when we were both in college. I sigh heavily every time I realize that college was already over half a decade ago.

Six years ago Antonio came up with the idea to rent a two-story bungalow house together on the east side. He said it was temporary, and we would just stay here, "Until one of us rides off with Prince Charming." Apparently, both of our princes got delayed somewhere along the way. Maybe they met each other and fell in love or maybe they just couldn't find a parking space. At least Anthony is tremendous fun to have around, and his grandma taught him how to cook well. He took the upstairs of the house, and I took down.

Our local street festival is an all day Saturday event that ushers us into late summer the last weekend in July. It's a final communal bang before everyone has to start thinking about back to school and the end of vacation season. The festival consists mostly of wall to wall people, beer, and fried food. There is music, too, but it's usually not to my personal taste. Yes, I confess to being a bit of a music snob.

At age 27, I'm a blue-eyed soul singer trapped in the body of an accountant. Unfortunately, the singer has been told he's hopelessly out of touch with the sounds of today a few too many times. I do have my own core fan base for homemade YouTube videos. Posting a new video of myself covering an old classic is a tried and true ego boost, but I went to one of the *American Idol* auditions when I was 20, and in that little room Simon Cowell said to my face, "You sound like the cabaret wedding singer who got hired because he's best friends with the groom."

"Ouch." The rest of that notorious day I vacillated between heartbreak and wanting to slash Mr. Cowell's tires.

I have two primary musical heroes. The first is Gene Pitney. He had one of the most unique voices in the history of rock and roll. What? You say you don't know who he was? I'm not surprised. He was a star in the early 1960s and he's in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. My grandma used to say, "Daniel, he's got tears in his voice. Hear those tears?" She would play one of her old vinyl albums and make me listen. She was right about him of course. Grandma was always right about almost everything.

The second hero is Bobby Hatfield of the Righteous Brothers. He was the short blond one. If you've ever fallen in love slow dancing to the Righteous Brothers' recording of "Unchained Melody," you'll understand why he's my hero. I've been told I even look a little like he did when he was young, and, believe it or not, we're both from Beaver Dam here in Wisconsin. I'm Bobby Hatfield's spiritual heir.

I love the sound of 60s pop and soul, but all but my core group of fans say it makes me and my singing hopelessly retro. Antonio's brother-in-law owns a small recording studio near downtown, and he's

been trying to make my sound more contemporary. We're working on a demo together with "working" being a relative term. We started putting it together almost eighteen months ago, and we only have two songs completely finished.

* * *

Thirty minutes later to the dot from the conversation with Antonio, I tapped the broom handle on the ceiling. It's so much easier than yelling up the stairs or sending him a text. Within seconds Antonio was posing on the staircase for my approval in neon green shorts and an orange tank top. He has the sneakers to match. He will be noticed, and that's Antonio's goal.

My choice of clothing trends toward the more conservative end of the spectrum. I'm dressed in khaki walking shorts and a dark blue polo. "Daniel, are you sure you don't want something with just a little more flash, hun?"

I shook my head. "I won't need it with the bright neon sign that's walking next to me."

"Jealous much?" asked Antonio, and then he laughed again.

The festival is a short five block walk from home. We live in a upbeat, busy part of the city, but our neighborhood is just far enough away from the centers of action to stay quiet. The closer we got to the festival, the louder the din of voices laced with raucous guitar and drums got. It felt great to get out of the house. I couldn't help but experience a surge of adrenaline.

"Funnel cakes!" shouted Antonio.

"Antonio, that's just grease you smell. It could be anything from a funnel cake to a french fry."

"Mmmm...french fries, not a bad idea Daniel." I glanced over at Antonio. He lifted the hem of his tank partway and was rubbing his slim, dark belly.

I smirked. "You don't have to start advertising just yet." After a few more steps, we slipped our way into the crowd about halfway along the eight block length of the festival. It is anchored at each end by stages for live music and performances.

The festival is advertised specifically as a street fair for adults and not children. That means we can surge along with the crowd and not trip over a stroller or end up with a child's ice cream cone plastered on our shirts. After just a block Antonio pulled me into an animated crowd in front of a bar dancing to club music blasting from the upstairs windows. Antonio tugged my arm and yanked me right into the center of the happy revelers.

He gave my chest a slap. "Loosen up Daniel! Celebrate!"

I did my best to dance and keep up with the crowd. Antonio has congratulate me on having a good sense of rhythm for a white

boy. All of that piano practice with a metronome accomplished something positive.

After a few minutes of shaking my little blond butt, I tapped Antonio on the shoulder and shouted in his ear, "Must...have...beer!"

He pointed toward the front door of the bar, and I shook my head “no” pointing toward a little stand where I knew I could be served without waiting in line for thirty minutes. Antonio shrugged, and we wedged our way out of the bar crowd to join the main traffic flow along the street. It was only about a half block more to our beer tent destination.

I leaned over and whispered, "They've got your funnel cake Antonio!"

He squealed. I watched the dough get dropped in hot sizzling oil and saw flashbacks of the chubby little kid I was in third grade. A plastic cup of lite beer was going to suffice for me except for the two bites of hot funnel cake Antonio would undoubtedly be stuffing into my mouth.

After we received and paid for our provisions, I did my best to scan the crowd to sort out a suitable direction to travel. Seeing over a crowd isn't always easy when you top out at five feet eight inches tall. Antonio has no problem seeing, but he's like a dog spotting squirrels in the city park. I leaned over to shout in his ear. "There's a band just a couple of blocks that way. Let's check 'em out."

Antonio protested, "The drag show is the other direction Daniel."

I tried to discuss the issue amid the noise of hundreds of other people milling around. "It's still a little early Antonio. We'll check out the band, and then go the other direction closer to the scheduled starting time for the drag show."

"OK, but I don't wanna miss my ladies."

The band was playing old punk and new wave covers, but from a distance the band members appeared to be close to my age. For a moment, Antonio stuck his fingers in his ears. If it doesn't have a dance beat, he starts to moan. I batted the hands down, and then the unmistakable drum machine thump of New Order kicked off. I yelled into Antonio's ear, "Fuck...they're doing New Order! You can dance to this!"

When the beat kicked in, Antonio started to swing his hips. "Blue Monday" isn't blue-eyed soul, but it has one hell of a melody line. The crowd roared their approval even if it was just a cover band. The bass player had his legs splayed wide doing his best to draw the crowd's attention with rockstar moves.

Then I glanced at their singer. The deadpan words didn't require much vocal talent, but he looked good. He wore tight jeans

and a t-shirt that was just a little too short on a thin, wiry frame. While he spit out the words to the crowd, he brushed his sweaty, dark hair out of his eyes and cracked a smile for the crowd. My knees weakened. Yeah, I'm a sucker for a skinny rock star with attitude. When the words ended, he danced around the stage all legs and arms with a little hairy trail and belly button showing beneath that t-shirt.

Antonio followed my gaze and yelled into my ear. "Put that tongue back in your mouth Daniel!"

Then Cupid aimed and shot the arrow through my heart. The band stuttered their way into Joy Division's "Love Will Tear Us Apart," and the lead vocalist sang it like a fucking punk torch ballad. He really could sing, and the performance was gorgeous. Well, HE was gorgeous.

My attention remained glued to the stage through three more songs. Antonio munched on his funnel cake, took sips from my beer, and tried to fake interest in the band. The crowd roared their approval for the bass player, but I couldn't take my eyes off the singer long enough to know what they were shouting about. I was mesmerized.

Finally, Antonio decided he had enough. He shouted in my ear. "Drag ladies Daniel! We gotta support 'em. They sing for our team!"

I nodded, "OK, yeah, I promised." I let Antonio tug me out of the crowd by the elbow. We found a relatively fast moving route tucked between storefronts and the back sides of food tents and jewelry carts. I reached up and wrapped my hand around Antonio's neck. "He took my breath away!"

Antonio shrugged. "Yeah, whatever. Maybe you can send him a cute little clip of you on Instagram."

While I struggled to keep up with Antonio's long legs, I realized that I had been too caught up in watching the singer to figure out the name of the band. I made a mental note to look up the website for the festival when I got home. If they were local, I needed to catch them again. They were new to me. I wondered if they were a new band. The local rock scene is thoroughly inbred with bands constantly morphing from one combination into another.

When we approached the the stage at the opposite end of the festival, the unmistakeable opening beats of Madonna's "Like a Virgin" split the air. Antonio screamed in my ear and danced his way into the crowd pulling me along at arm's length. A six foot queen in four inch heels and cone bra took the stage to uproarious applause. Antonio was in his element, and I smiled. The crowd was a friendly and appreciative one.

It was a fun and colorful show. We were treated to impersonations of Madonna, Tina Turner, Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, and more. The quality of performance varied from performer to

performer, but the energy never died down and the costuming standards were high. Antonio sang along to every song. Fortunately, the crowd was so loud nobody could hear him. He raised his long arms over his head and clapped along with every beat.

Antonio was right. I spent far too much time indoors over the summer, and I was starting to lose my fun side in frustration with my songwriting. I also grumbled nearly daily about lacking outlets to sing in public. When the drag queen impersonating Cher hit the stage, I found myself sending my own vocals soaring into the night along with "If I Could Turn Back Time." It was a great moment of glorious release. Antonio spontaneously hugged me when it was over, and a total stranger hugged both of us. The muscular stranger blushed afterward and then just held up his beer for a toast in explanation for his burst of friendly intimacy.

At the end of the string of performances, the audience voted for a winner. A panel of judges selected three finalists. The competition came down to the drag versions of Donna Summer, Taylor Swift, and Cher. It was no surprise to see Cher take the honor and toss her long black hair over her broad shoulders while flower petals, glitter, and napkins tossed from the crowd littered the stage. I saw a single tear roll down Antonio's cheek.

I shouted into his ear, "Let's go see if we can catch that other band packing up. Then we can stop for a drink somewhere quieter, or head home. How's that sound?" I didn't really let him answer. Instead, I yanked him toward the side of the crowd. He waved goodbye like he was bidding adieu to adoring admirers.

Antonio was breathless when we hit our little express traffic lane back to the opposite end of the festival. "Did you like that Daniel?" he asked. "Cher was so hot...he had real biceps."

I smiled. "It was a lot of fun, but let's hustle down to the other end."

I frowned when we returned to the opposite stage. A country band was working their way through a Miranda Lambert cover. There was no sign left of the previous musicians. I sighed heavily. Antonio turned to me. "You've got it bad for that guy Daniel. Haven't seen you this way since Lance."

Grumbling, I said, "Don't talk about him."

He threw up his hands. "Just sayin'. I think it's kinda cute that you got all goo-goo eyed." He poked my chest. "That means you're still alive in there."

I started to protest, "I didn't get all goo-goo..." He was right. "OK, yeah, I'm guilty. I couldn't stop staring at him. Wanna stop for a drink on the way home?"

Antonio nodded. "Yes, and maybe I can get some tater tots or

wings." He rubbed his belly. "That funnel cake wasn't enough."

I stared up at his tall, thin frame. "You know, Antonio, you're not gonna be skinny forever. One day those wings are gonna stick around here..." I poked at a thigh, "And here..." I poked him in the belly.

He tossed his head. "No reason not to enjoy myself until then." The noise of the crowd and the twang of country guitar grew softer while we walked in the soft light cast by street lamps. The bar was only a few blocks away, but it would feel like a different world from the festival. It was likely to be even less crowded since many regular customers would be siphoned away by the festival event.

I held the door for Antonio and followed him inside. I brushed my hair back off my forehead and waited a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the dim light of the bar. I scanned the room and my jaw dropped. There he was! My latest crush was seated at the bar.

Introduction

Antonio whispered to me, "You're staring mon ami."

I pulled my eyes off the stranger and then nearly tripped over the foot of someone else. "Antonio, lets grab our drinks and go back to the corner."

He shrugged. "Whatever you say. You could introduce yourself and get a close-up view, but don't let your best friend tell you what to do." He let his voice trail off as he spoke the last words.

The bar wasn't specifically a gay bar. It was just a neighborhood bar that was friendly to everyone who was willing to pay for a drink. There was nothing special about the looks of the bar, but they had a great old-fashioned jukebox that played 60s and 70s hits. I ordered another lite beer at the bar and Antonio made himself happy with a whiskey and Coke plus an order of fried chicken wings on the way. We found a small two seat table near a back corner of the bar and settled in together. It was a good spot to see almost the entire clientele but avoid drawing attention to ourselves.

The object of my attention was alone. Antonio waved a hand in front of my face. "You don't even know if he's one of us Daniel."

I huffed at him. "It's not just that I'm interested in that, but he is cute. I'm curious about his voice. He sang rock, but his voice was beautiful. I bet he could sing other songs just as well Antonio."

Antonio rested his hand on my forearm. "Daniel, why don't you just go up to him and say hi. You know that's I would do. He's a little too much all arms and legs for me, though. He's yours, but you can't figure out if you've got any kind of chance from this distance."

I protested. "I'm just a fan Antonio."

"Fans clap and ask for an autograph Daniel. They don't give the serious once-over and then sit in the back corner of the bar wondering what the singer's lips taste like."

I threw a sharp elbow at Antonio. "Stop it."

Antonio raised an eyebrow. "You mean you aren't wondering what his kisses are like?" He pursed his lips.

A warm blush swept across my face. "OK, yes, you're right. I even thought about what it would feel like with those long skinny legs wrapped around me."

Antonio stared at me with mock disgust on his face. "Those skinny legs? Just ask me anytime Daniel. I'll wrap my skinny legs around you. You know I will."

A bartender stepped up to our table holding a paper basket filled with fried chicken wings. A plastic container of bbq sauce rested along the side. " Jeff, wow, table service!" I exclaimed.

He winked across the table at Antonio. "Only for our favorite

customers." Jeff turned on his heel before Antonio could respond. As Jeff walked away, Antonio fanned himself with his long thin fingers.

"He's got a wife and kids at home Antonio. Don't get too excited."

Antonio leaned toward me and whispered in my ear. "That might be, but he's fantasy number four in line to call up on those nights I've got insomnia."

I laughed and choked on my beer. "Sometimes you're just too much Antonio."

He dunked one of the wings into the sauce and then gingerly took a bite. He rolled his eyes back in consideration and then pronounced, "Hits the spot. Have one Daniel."

I frowned. "Uggh, I'd have heartburn keeping me up until three. Indulge. They're all yours."

The object of my attention was nearing the bottom of his beer glass. Antonio nudged me. "C'mon Daniel, go and at least say hi. Don't let the big fish get away. Tell him you liked whatever godawful song that was he was singing. You'll at least get to see a smile up close."

I watched as the beer glass connected with his lips. He turned to the side, and I watched his Adam's apple rise and fall in silhouette. My heart pounded like a drum in my chest. I grabbed Antonio's forearm. "OK, I'll go risk making a fool of myself. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?"

"That's it tiger! Go get 'em. Antonio raised the hand that wasn't holding a wing. He curled his fingers into claw formation. "Rawr Daniel!"

I stood up from the table and slowly brushed my hands down my shirt and gave a little tug to the hem of my shorts.

Antonio bumped me on the hip. "Stop being a lady. Just go say hi."

I'm miserable when I have to introduce myself to someone new, particularly if I find them interesting. I start to over think absolutely everything, and I mean everything. I was trying to figure out how I should walk across the bar. Should I saunter? Or maybe a more aggressive, confident gait. Or maybe it should just be very nonchalant.

Antonio bumped me again. "And no sashay. You're not in a drag show mon ami."

I swatted Antonio's hand away and tried to walk with firm purpose. Just as I put the first foot in front of the other Martha and the Vandellas kicked in with "Dancing In the Street" on the jukebox. I stepped up to one side of the stranger. Damn, he was gorgeous up close. I was worried my knees would knock together. His hair was a little shaggy and long, but that was an easy fix. He was taking the last

swallow of his beer, so I said, "I liked your music at the festival," to get his attention.

He turned and his mouth was sparkling white with a mouthful of perfect teeth. I tried to gaze into his eyes and avoid staring down at his Adam's apple and everything further below. "Hey, thanks, glad you liked it. What was your favorite song?"

He was comfortable and relaxed. He had changed into a plaid button-down shirt that didn't leave a line of bare flesh at his waist. I put my elbow on the bar and then waved my hand uncomfortably not knowing exactly what to do with it. I pulled it back and forgot the question. "What was that?" I asked.

I could hear him chuckle softly under his breath. "Song?"

"Oh...yeah...right. I had never really heard 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' done quite that way. Your voice is...well...really nice." I noticed his left hand was resting on the bar and he wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

He smiled again. "Yeah, it makes it a little more bearable to sing. I can use actual notes and not either shout or just sort of talk over the band."

He must have been making reference to the New Order covers. I tried desperately to stick with the topic of conversation and stop myself from jumping into his lap. "Hey, can I buy you another beer? Yours is almost empty."

"That would be really kind of you." He pointed at the stool next to him. "Why don't you have a seat?"

I started to climb on to the stool and didn't aim my back side quite right. I could feel myself start to slide and awkwardly clung to the bar. He tried to pretend like he wasn't watching while I straightened myself up. I glanced over my shoulder toward Antonio. He had already found a new table mate, but he shot a thumbs up toward me.

"What are you drinking?" I asked.

"It's an IPA." I caught Jeff's attention and ordered another IPA.

"Is it ok if I ask your name?"

He nodded. "I'm Greg. And you are?"

My mind blanked for fifteen seconds. I couldn't even remember my name, and then I finally blurted out, "Daniel. It's Daniel Noland. I try and be a little bit of a singer myself." I groaned inside. I had been singing in my spare time since I was eleven. It really wasn't accurate to downplay it so much."

Greg raised an eyebrow. "Oh? What kind of music do you sing."

Martha was giving way to the Supremes on the jukebox. I tried to put it out of my head so I wouldn't start singing along. "Mostly retro

soul. I like older 60s and 70s music."

Greg nodded and smiled. "Wow, some really good music. I don't know if I can really handle most of that. You've really got to have that convincing soulful, almost bluesy tone, you know." He tapped his fingers on the bar to the beat.

I grinned. He at least understood that part of my kind of music. "Yeah, definitely. I've got an embarrassing question. I hope it's ok to ask."

The IPA arrived and Greg reached out his hand to slide it across the bar. "Shoot. Why not."

"What's the name of your band?"

"Slow Monkeys." He furrowed his brow. "Hey, didn't you say you saw us? It's kind of a dumb name, but it's right there on the drum."

The warm blush filled my face again. I cringed. "I've got a confession."

"You weren't really there?"

I shook my head. "No, I was there, but I wasn't really looking at the drum."

Greg threw his head back and laughed out loud. Then he looked at me with a sparkle in his eye. "I got it, and, yeah, sorry for the big laugh. Thank you. That's a compliment...I think."

I took a long drink of my beer before I just said, "Yes."

He made an effort to prolong the conversation. "It's always nice meeting a fan."

"Is your band local?" I asked.

Greg nodded. "Yeah, this is about the fourth band for me. Slow Monkeys has only been together about nine months. We play mostly on the south side, so maybe you don't make it down there too much?"

I agreed with his assessment. The truth was I didn't really go to bars to watch bands often at all. The few times I went out to specifically see local talent in the last few years it was almost exclusively singer-songwriters. "I live just a few blocks from here, and I have to admit I travel in a pretty small neighborhood area sometimes."

"Well, if you ever make it down to see us again, come up to the stage after to say hi. It makes us feel good to have someone want to see us more than once."

I grinned. "Yeah, I can understand that." I pulled out my wallet. "And hey, why don't you take my card. If there is something coming up I should see, drop me an e-mail?" I handed him the business card.

He looked down. "Catering?"

I laughed. "Yeah, that's what I do. I've been running the

business with a friend for three years."

"Hey, that's great, not many entrepreneurs our age...at least that are successful."

Jackie and I struggled sometimes, but we were bringing in enough income through the catering for us both to quit day jobs. I could sense the conversation running down, and I couldn't say all the things that were running through my head and articulate the questions I wanted to ask. "Great to meet you Greg, but I think I'd better get back to my friend back there in the corner." I gestured in Antonio's direction.

Greg held out his hand. "And likewise Daniel."

We shook hands. His grip was both firm and gentle at the same time. I stared into his eyes for a moment, and he met my gaze. My heart thumped. I let go and turned back toward Antonio while I was trying to catch my breath.

I seated myself on the chair across from Antonio and felt like I was starting to hyperventilate. He spoke up immediately. "Hey Daniel, I'm proud of you. I kept an eye out, and you spoke more than two words." He reached out a hand to high five me.

I slapped back weakly. "What happened to your company?"

He sighed. "Oh, I think I giggled wrong or something. He was probably looking for a one-night stand. I don't give it away that easy."

"No, you don't, and that makes me happy."

Antonio winked at me. "At least not to everyone."

My thoughts flashed back to when I first met Antonio. We ended up in bed the same night we first met at a dance club. A few chemicals were involved that night, too. We were young and not the brightest bulbs in the string of Christmas lights. I woke up the next morning in the arms of a tall, skinny stranger. Within a month we were best friends.

Antonio asked, "And did I see you giving him your number?"

I shrugged. "Catering business card. It's got my e-mail, and he said he lets fans know about upcoming shows."

Antonio leaned across the table. "So...is he one of us?"

"I don't know Antonio. No wedding ring, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. He's even more handsome up close, though."

Antonio folded his arms across his chest. "He needs a haircut."

I grumbled. "He's a rock singer. The long hair goes with the territory. It's easier for me to tangle my fingers in it."

With a roll of his eyes, Antonio said, "You should always want well-groomed Daniel. That's what sets us proud gay men apart from the beasts. He needs to be house-trained and well-groomed. Those qualities are non-negotiable."

I smirked. "Thank you Aunt Antonio. I'll take all of that under consideration."

He unfolded his arms. "Are you ready to go Daniel? I'm starting to get sleepy. I need that weekend beauty rest."

The chicken wings basket was empty and so were both of our drinks. "Yep, I think we've pretty much taken care of this night." I leaned across the table. "And thank you for getting me out of the house." I gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

He nodded. "That's what upstairs neighbors are for. We look over you like a personal guardian angel."

I sighed. "Take it down a notch."

We stood, and I dropped a sizable tip on the table for Jeff. He waved to us as we headed out the door. I glanced over at Antonio's neon green and orange. It was practically glowing in the dark. He followed my gaze. "You really are jealous. We can go shopping together Daniel."

Setting out for home just three blocks away, I spoke some of my thoughts out loud. "I wonder if he's ever tried singing older 60s and 70s music Antonio. He said he didn't know if he could handle it."

Antonio swung his arms back and forth in an exaggerated fashion as we walked. "You could have asked him."

"Oh, I was so tongue-tied, it's a miracle I even asked his name."

Turning toward me, Antonio asked, "And his name is?"

"Greg."

"Hmm...Greg, not bad. Gregory is even better. You should suggest that Daniel. D and G, like Dolce...it has a ring to it."

I stopped walking. "You're jumping way ahead. I don't even know if I'll ever see or hear from him again."

Antonio looked back at me and tapped the side of his cheek with his long index finger. "A thought Daniel. A crazy, wonderful, wild, and exciting thought."

I had experienced a wide range of Antonio's wild and wonderful thoughts in the past. He should have added "unpredictable" to his list of adjectives."

"What if...." Antonio drug out the words into a breathy, expectant phrase.

I cut him off. "What if what?"

He poked my chest with the index finger. "The two of you could sing together. You would look good. Tall, skinny dark-haired guy and cute little blond guy." He nodded vigorously. "Yes, Daniel. That's it. It's a great idea." He paused. "Right?"

My instant response in my head was, "Never in a million years," but it was quickly overtaken by a sense of wonder. Could I sing duets? I had never really tried before. I was a solo artist. I had trouble

even singing in front of a band. I tried that for a few months and we just argued all the time about the mix and how to arrange everyone on stage and who really was the focal point. But to sing with Greg? I finally responded, "You really think so?"

Antonio shrugged, "Worth a try? It worked for Hall and Oates."

I cringed. The last thing I wanted was to sing "Rich Girl" in questionable bars for the next twenty years. Still, I kind of liked Antonio's idea.

"You can give him a call and say, 'Hey, I've got an idea...'"

I frowned. "I gave him my number, not the other way around."

"Well then, let this be a lesson..." Antonio shook his finger, but then he laughed. He put his long arm around my shoulder. "Stranger things have happened mon ami. I think it has been a special night. Let's mark this one down as one to remember."

We walked the rest of the way home with our arms across each other's shoulders. Antonio was right. Regardless of what happened, it had been a memorable night and another strong confirmation of the quality of our friendship. My cell phone rang just as Antonio opened the front door to our house.

Jackie

I flipped on the light switch in the vestibule as I was pulling my cell phone from my pocket. Antonio leaned over my shoulder. "Is it...?"

I shrugged him off. "I don't know. It's not any number I recognize, but it is 414."

Antonio whispered, "I bet I know who it is..."

"I don't know, and it's really late at night." The phone kept ringing.

"Answer it Daniel or I will!" Antonio reached his hand over my shoulder toward the phone.

I turned and flattened the palm of my hand on his chest and pushed him away. "OK...ok..." I punched the button to answer the phone. "Hello...?"

It was Greg's voice. There was a nervous undercurrent in his voice that I hadn't heard in the bar. "Hey Daniel. This is Greg. I'm the guy you just met a little while ago down at the bar."

Antonio stared at me with a silly grin on his face. He whispered, "Is it?"

I nodded yes and then pushed him further away. I hissed, "Privacy...."

"What was that?" Greg asked.

I answered trying hard to keep my voice from shaking. "It's just my friend. I just got home, and he's saying goodnight." Fortunately, Antonio was already climbing the stairs to leave me in private.

"Oh...well, is it ok to talk now? I could call back later..."

I fumbled with the phone and nearly dropped it. "No...no. I mean, it's fine to talk now. He's gone." I opened the door to my place, stepped through, and closed it gently behind me.

"That's good." Greg paused and I carefully sat on the sofa. "Hey, the reason I called is because I really liked meeting you. I was worried I didn't show that very well."

My heart was melting in my chest as I listened to his deep voice, but I tried to stay calm. I coughed when I tried to speak and then managed, "I liked meeting you, too, Greg, and it was a lot of fun seeing you sing."

The comment was met with a few seconds of silence. Then Greg responded in a shy, measured tone. "Thank you...Hey, Daniel, you said you sing, too, and old soul stuff. Do you play any instruments? Guitar? Piano?"

"I'm competent on keyboards. That's about as far as it goes."

Greg laughed. "Better than me. Daniel, any chance we could get together again sometime in the next few days?"

My schedule was packed with catering work, but this was one opportunity I could not let get away. "I think so. Did you have something in mind?"

"There is a band I'm curious about seeing in your neighborhood two nights from now. Maybe we could meet up at the bar where they are playing and just go from there?"

My palms were sweating, but I was smiling ear to ear. I was going to get to see Greg again, and I had his number on my cell phone now. "That would be perfect Greg. We'll text with the specifics. And...thanks for calling."

"Honestly, it's been all my pleasure Daniel. You have a nice rest of your night, and I'll see you real soon."

I rubbed my free hand on my jeans. "You too Greg. Goodnight."

The phone call was over. It was short but sweet. I turned and buried my face in the arm of the sofa. I told myself to stay calm, and that I really didn't know anything about Greg, but part of my heart was already floating up toward the clouds like a junior high kid experiencing his first crush. Then I heard Antonio's big feet thumping down the stairs. He pounded on my door.

"Come in Antonio!" I shouted.

He tried to appear nonchalant sauntering over to the sofa but when he got close, he leaped on to the sofa next to me, threw his arms around my neck, pulled on my chin so that I faced him and said, "Tell me all about it...now."

I sighed. "You were listening weren't you?"

He grinned. "Um, maybe sorta, but honestly, Daniel, all I heard was 'mumble mumble mumble' and then maybe a squeal from you, and then silence."

I scowled. "I didn't squeal...did I?"

Antonio smirked. "OK, maybe I exaggerated, but tell me. I need to know. Do you have a date little blond Romeo?"

I couldn't help but flash a goofy smile. "Yeah, we're going to catch a band together later in the week."

He slapped me on the shoulder. "Look at you! I'm so proud. My little Daniel is growing up."

I sighed heavily again. "Sometimes you're just too much Antonio...too much."

He laughed. "Always mon ami."

* * *

Sunday passed uneventfully. I spent much of the day scouring my kitchen and making sure all of the pots and pans and utensils were put away and stacked properly in place. I don't alphabetize my spices but my obsession over order in the kitchen borders on that territory. Monday was going to be a busy catering day for the business. Jackie

was coming over. We were going to bake batches of cookies for a Tuesday event and try out some new recipes for savory foods while we let the cookies do their thing in the oven. Antonio poked me all day long with hints of wedding bells and long makeout sessions between Greg and I. It did feel good to have a real possibility out there. My dry spell had lasted for months.

Jackie walked through the door at 8 a.m. sharp on Monday morning. She was loaded down with bags of food. I had all of the baking ingredients we needed, and she promised to do the shopping for the other ingredients we would need in our trial sessions. She dropped four bags on the counter and reached out her arms for a hug.

Jackie is five years older than me and happily married with a six-year-old son. Her mother lives with the family. She helps provide handy babysitting. Jackie only stopped working for about six months when Jason was born. She said being without a job nearly drove her crazy. She started her own virtual office assistant business at home. We were introduced by a mutual friend, and Jackie dropped the office work to go all in with me on the catering. Our business celebrated its fourth anniversary this past spring.

As we hugged, she asked, "How was the weekend? Did you get out of the house Daniel? I hope..."

I interrupted. "Everybody is trying to get me out of the house. Am I really that bad?"

She pulled back slightly from the hug and stared into my eyes before answering. "We all love you so much, but yep, Daniel, you are. I'm sorry to say that." She reached up and ran a finger across my forehead. "Look at you. It's almost the end of summer and you still look like you haven't gotten any sun."

I turned toward the counter and started to peer into the bags of food. "Yes, you are probably right. Antonio got me out to the festival on Saturday night. We had fun there."

She started to talk about the food. "I got lamb. The veggies looked amazing for a Monday morning, and of course the tomatoes are running full tilt." She turned toward me and made a comment. "Something tells me there is more to the festival story..."

I pulled my hand out of the bag and cradled a purple heirloom tomato. "What do you mean?"

Jackie place a hand on one hip. "Daniel, you've always been pretty transparent. Something else happened other than just you and Antonio wandering around. Am I right?"

I hadn't been able to keep secrets since childhood. My older sister that might as well have written the secret across my face with a black magic marker. Anyone who knew me well could always tell when there was something inside struggling hard to get out. It was

exasperating sometimes, but with Jackie and Antonio, it was fruitless to try and keep things to myself. I ran my fingers across the countertop. "OK, yes...something."

"Are you really going to make me try to guess? Or will you buck up and tell me?"

With an effort to try and keep my voice calm, I said, "I met a guy."

The corner of her mouth curled up into a half smile. "See....I can sense these things Daniel."

I tried to change the topic. "Maybe we should get started on the baking. We can clear this stuff off the counter and..."

Jackie stepped between me and the bags of food. "No, you don't. There's more. Tell me about him. Good looking? Older? Younger? I want the details."

"OK, then let's have a cup of coffee. You're going to pry it all out of me anyway."

We made quick cups of coffee and sat at the kitchen table. I told Jackie about Greg. She nodded with a sparkle of interest in her eyes. I tried not to dwell on his looks. His face, wiry muscle, the shaggy hair, and the smile all pulsed in my memory, but I didn't want to sound obsessed. I failed.

Jackie interrupted me. "It's a real crush, isn't it?"

I wrapped my hands around my mug. "Seriously, I'm trying to not jump down the road, and the music is another reason to get to know him even if there aren't any real sparks between us. I think he's a good singer."

She rubbed a finger on the side of her cheek. "Are you thinking about singing together?"

The suggestion reared its head again. I guess it was a natural next thought for anyone who heard about two singers getting together. I answered her. "I really didn't even think about it until Antonio brought it up. I'm not sure I'm cut out to sing with someone else?"

Jackie leaned forward. "Too much of an ego Daniel?"

I protested. "No, it's not that. I'm just not sure I have the voice to blend. I don't know if I know how to sing a duet well." It probably was the ego. I might as well face it. I like the spotlight.

She set her coffee down and folded her arms at the edge of the table. "I think two guys singing together is hot. A man and a woman is ok, but its two hot guys that really get my pulse going."

I wrinkled my eyebrow. "Two gay guys Jackie?"

She nodded. "Well, yeah, why not? Hot is hot, Daniel."

"You think I'm hot Jackie?" I paused. "Wait, I'm not sure I really want you to answer that."

She stared at me and I watched the thought cogs turning in her head. "No. You aren't. Your head is big enough already."

After a few seconds of silence, we both burst out laughing.

* * *

By four in the afternoon, I was exhausted. I was stuffed, too. Jackie and I were on our feet most of the day shuffling around the kitchen putting together dough, baking, trimming meat, firing up the grill outside, chopping and trimming vegetables. Then we had to taste everything. We didn't need to stop for any real lunch. We were grazing all day long. I collapsed on to one of the kitchen chairs. "A good day, Jackie, but I'm beat."

"Yeah, you're right. Two more minutes and the last batch of cookies comes out of the oven. Then I'll join you there at the table."

I held my watch up. "You know who is going to be here in just a few minutes..."

"Antonio?" she asked.

"Yep, he gets home from work usually by about ten after. I'll place bets he'll be hungry, too."

She turned toward the oven and pulled on a mitt. "That's good then. He can test out what we have left over. I'm still not sure about those lamb meatballs. The shepherd's pie was good. I bet he'll like that."

"Just keep the cookies away from him."

As expected, while Jackie was pulling macadamia nut cookies out of the oven, I heard the sound of Antonio's car. It was more than ten years old, and the engine was noisier than it should be. I expected to get a call any day when he was stranded somewhere with a broken down car. I raised a hand. "Here comes the pattern." The door from the car slammed, and I nodded. A few seconds later the outside door to our house opened. I whispered, "A quick sort through the mail, and..." Antonio knocked on the door.

"Come in Antonio, we're in the kitchen!" I called.

He squealed when he saw Jackie. "Jackie! It's been ages! Are you two cooking up some good stuff in here. It smells fantabulous!" Antonio wrapped her tight in his long arms and gave her a quick peck on the lips.

She giggled. Jackie rarely ever giggled just around me, but Antonio could bring it out in anyone. "Actually, we have some things we would like you to try."

Antonio reached for the pile of paper napkins on the counter and stuffed one into the collar of his shirt. "Give me a knife and fork and I'm ready." He rubbed his slim belly. "I'm hungry, too."

I reached out for a hug to welcome him home. "You're always hungry Antonio."

He nodded. "I'm a tall boy. I need nutrition." Antonio grabbed a kitchen chair and seated himself at the table. He turned toward Jackie who was already preparing a plate of shepherd's pie. Antonio reached out and grabbed my forearm. "Jackie...did little Daniel tell you his big news?"

I whispered, "Little..." Antonio smiled at me and held up a hand like he was measuring my height and shrugged then turned back to Jackie.

"He did, and he told me it's a singer. I was just telling him I thought two handsome men singing together was really kind of hot. Don't you agree?" She carried the plate over and set it in front of Antonio. It held a sizable portion of the shepherd's pie with roasted asparagus on the side.

Antonio looked over the plate. "Wow, this is a whole dinner..." He glanced up at Jackie. "Two gorgeous men together are always hot, Jackie."

She asked, "Did they look good together?"

Taking a bite, Antonio chewed and then swallowed. "Wow, you two can cook for me anytime. And yes, the other guy is a little on the skinny and shaggy side, but he's not bad."

I grumbled and whispered, "Not bad..."

Antonio slapped me on the shoulder. "You know I'm just joking mon ami."

Jackie poked at one of the cookies to make sure that it was done and then joined us at the table. "So when do you see him next Daniel? And does he have a name?"

"Wednesday night, and his name is Greg. We're catching a band together here on the east side.

Jackie smiled. "Oh, very nice." She reached across the table for my hand and closed her fingers over top of it. "And you know I want nothing but the best for you. You're a lot more than just a business partner. You're one of my best friends."

"Thank you, but I really think both you and Antonio might be getting this cart a long way ahead of the horse. It could all just fizzle. I'm trying to be prepared."

She squeezed my hand. "I've got a good feeling Daniel." She turned toward Antonio who was stuffing his face with the shepherd's pie. "Don't you agree Antonio?"

He was busy chewing and couldn't talk. He just nodded yes.

"See, we're in agreement. Now, let's get the cookies that are cool boxed up, and then I need to head home to feed my hungry mouths. Is it ok to drop off the cookies in the morning Daniel?"

I stood. "Of course. It will give me some thought time to try and work on the song in my head outside of the house."

Jackie whispered, "And time to make plans for Wednesday..."

Duets

At 6:30 p.m. Wednesday evening I stood in front of the mirror brushing my hair first one way and then the other while struggling to tamp down the nerves that made my stomach do flip flops. I was due to meet Greg at the bar at 7 p.m. The band wasn't scheduled to play until 8:30, but, at his suggestion, if we met earlier we could talk before the bar got loud.

Earlier in the evening I endured my inevitable consultation session with Antonio about the night. He suggested I dress simply but with a flash of bold color. Consequently, I was wearing jeans and sneakers, but I added to them a bright red polo. According to Antonio, it fit just snugly enough to show that I wasn't yet letting my body go to hell. I'm thankful for that, and he was pleased. He put a hand on my chest and announced, "Yum."

I brushed my teeth three times and scrubbed my face twice. Antonio told me I needed to have a goal for the evening. I think my only realistic goal was to not make a fool of myself. Finally, he pushed me into a goal of getting Greg to commit to seeing me another time.

When I looked up details on the band performing, I was surprised to find out they were an R&B band that specialized in Motown covers. I wondered if that was a subtle nod in my direction from Greg? They were a band from Chicago looking to expand their regional base for live performances.

Five minutes before I was ready to leave, I reached the broom handle up to the ceiling and tapped on it. Within seconds Antonio was clomping down the stairs. "You need something Daniel?"

"I need a last minute check Antonio. Is it all good?"

He stepped up to me and rubbed his chin while his eyes inspected me from head to foot. He reached out and tugged at the collar of my shirt and then said one word, "Yes."

"Yes what?"

He rubbed his chin again in fake deep thought. "I'd do you." He flashed a wicked grin.

I frowned. "You have 'done' me, or don't you remember?"

Antonio giggled. "Oh, that's right, silly me. Well, I'd still do your cute little blond butt. Go out there and get 'em tiger, and..." He handed me a condom.

I sighed. "I seriously doubt I'm going to need that."

"Take it mon ami, it's your good luck charm."

I took the condom, grinned, and gave him a hug. "Thanks Antonio, and, yes, don't worry, I'll share all of the details."

* * *

It was a short five block walk from home to the bar. I

considered driving, but there was a good chance I might only get a block or two closer to the bar in my hunt for parking spaces. It was easier and less time consuming to just travel by foot in my neighborhood. The day had been warm and humid, but a cool breeze was settling in from off the lake. It was going to be a beautiful night.

When I approached the door to the bar, I pulled out my cell phone. It was 6:59. I didn't really want to be punctual to the minute, but I have a really difficult time being late for anything. I'm sure it's just psychological, but I literally feel itchy if I'm going to be late. I pulled open the door to the bar expecting I might need to sit on my own for several minutes waiting for Greg to arrive.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I felt arms wrap around from behind me just after I stepped through the door. They held me tight, and I heard the voice, "Hey Daniel." It was Greg. His grip was strong and warm. I looked down to see his forearms wrapped around my waist. All of my questions were gone about whether he was one of us.

I turned around still reeling in disbelief that I was already in Greg's arms. It was both exciting and terrifying. He leaned forward and down to give me a quick peck on the cheek. My throat was dry when I tried to speak. "Well...hi. This is a surprise."

He tilted his head to one side. "Too much?"

My brain told me that I should consider saying yes, but my body was working on a vehement no. I reached forward to wrap my arms around his waist. I avoided a specific answer to the question and instead asked, "Should we find a table?"

Greg laughed. The sound of his laughter was deep and resonated down low in his chest like his voice. When he sang with Slow Monkeys, he was able to reach the higher notes in "Love Will Tear Us Apart" but his speaking voice told me he would be very comfortable in a lower range. He answered, "Of course," then dropped his grip and gestured with his long right arm encouraging me to lead the way.

He put a hand on my shoulder and stopped me for a moment. "A beer like before Daniel?"

I nodded. "Yes, lite." Greg approached the bar to order our drinks while I found a table close to the far end of the bar. It was far enough from the door to be quieter, but it wasn't in a dark corner either. I seated myself and drummed my fingers nervously on the table until I saw Greg approach with the beers in hand.

I was relieved when the conversation started quickly. Greg shared details about the band we were going to see. He said that he grew up with the band's bass player. When they were in junior high together, they made music together with the bass player providing

piano accompaniment for Greg's singing. Greg also liked the band's Motown repertoire. I asked him if he ever sang Motown songs himself. He repeated what he said the night we met. He liked the songs but thought his voice wasn't a good fit for the genre.

"I really liked how you hit those notes in your version of 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' Greg." I lifted the beer to my lips and took a small sip. I couldn't take my eyes off his face even long enough to look down at my glass. His profile with a slightly elongated nose and a firm chin sent chills up my spine. I tried to avoid being obvious about undressing him with my eyes.

"Honestly, Daniel, part of it is all of my musician friends are fixated on rock and punk with maybe a little bit of raspy old blues thrown in. They mostly look down on the poppier side of 60s and 70s music."

I frowned slightly but asked, "And you don't?"

He shook his head and said, "No, I grew up with my parents playing it all the time. My dad inherited my grandpa's record collection. He must have hundreds of vinyl albums from the 60s and most are nearly in mint condition. Frankly, I wondered if you might help me."

"How so?"

I caught him glancing down toward my waist before he answered. I tried not to blush. "You said you play keyboards? Maybe we could get together somewhere and have our own little session. I would love to hear you sing, and maybe you could give me a few pointers."

The blush deepened, but I hoped the light was dim enough in the bar that it wouldn't show. "I have my own little minor studio set up at home."

Greg's eyes opened wider. "You do?"

"I put up YouTube videos every once in awhile of me singing."

"So, you are a serious singer. You were a little too humble the other night. Do you have a band Daniel?" He leaned forward as he asked the question.

I shook my head. "I didn't do so well singing in front of a band. I'm working with some solo demo stuff with a friend of a friend, but I'm not sure that it's going anywhere."

Greg's eyes were roaming again. I squirmed in my chair. I hoped he liked what he was seeing. I was convinced he was interested in more than just the music, but I was also wary of being crushed by incorrect interpretations of body language. I tried to focus seriously on his musical questions. "Why don't you like singing with a band Daniel?"

I cringed. "Seriously, I'm a little bit of a diva."

He laughed out loud then quickly glanced around the bar and quieted down. Greg leaned across the table brushing his hair back from his face. "Surely not Daniel, but yeah, I know what it's like."

I was mesmerized by Greg's company. I was starting to relax. The conversation was easy and flowed without hesitation. Twenty minutes after I arrived, I found myself asking if he would ever like to stop by my place to try out singing in my little studio. He jumped right on the offer with an enthusiastic yes. Ten minutes later I was asking just how important seeing the band was.

Greg swallowed the last of his beer and smirked. "Is this an invitation Daniel?"

"I th..think so," I stammered out. I had never ever invited anyone home on a first date. If Greg came home with me, I knew that I would have to endure merciless teasing from Antonio, but he would also celebrate my audacity. We drained the last of our beers and hurried out the door.

I asked Greg about his day job on the walk to my place. "I work retail Daniel. It's not the greatest job and not a lot of upward mobility, but it's pretty easy to get off work for band gigs. I keep my fingers crossed when I go to bed at night that the band still has real possibilities for something bigger. We've started working up original songs with local songwriters and are doing some writing within the band. I hope that's the next big step. I envy you working for yourself though."

Consciously aware that we were falling in step with each other, I said, "Yes, I'm proud of the business, but I'm still a musician doing another job to get by. If the music ever became my full time job, I think I would be the happiest man in the city."

He turned his head toward me smiling broadly. "I understand."

* * *

I fumbled with my key entering the house and explained that my best friend Antonio lived upstairs. Greg looked around the living room. "This is nice. I'm just in a little apartment down south. It has no character. The rooms are just these plain little white boxes with tan carpeting." I almost blurted out that the house sharing arrangement with Antonio was only intended to be temporary until my prince came along, but I bit my tongue.

"Do you want anything to drink?" I asked. "I've got most everything in the kitchen. I also have a range of samples of things for the business."

He shook his head. "If I'm going to try to sing, just water would be great."

I showed the way to the little studio room in the back corner of the house. "Feel free to look around. I'll be right back with the

water."

Greg was looking around the room at items on the walls when I returned. It was a handy place to display my music treasures. I had framed on the wall a signed Righteous Brothers concert poster, an album cover signed by Gene Pitney, and my *American Idol* contestant credentials.

"You were on *American Idol* Daniel?" Greg asked.

I handed him the water. "No, not really. I went to the auditions and made it to that little room you see on TV. I got the Simon Cowell insult and then went home crushed." I frowned.

Greg put his hand on my shoulder. "It's ok. You made it a lot further than most people. Some of my friends suggested I try it, but I think I would be a wreck trying to sing solo without a band."

I reached up to touch his hand and suggested that I play the keyboard while he sang something. I can play hundreds of 60s and 70s pop songs on my keyboard. If I hear something new, I often can pick out the basic melody on the keys in minutes. I asked Greg if there was anything in particular he wanted to try, and for the first time Greg looked nervous.

He sat next to me on the bench and appeared to be either lost in thought or close to deciding to leave. I started to play chords on the keyboard and reached out and touched his forearm. "Do you know this song Greg?"

Greg looked up at me. "I think so. Play a little more."

I was playing the Everly Brothers' "Let It Be Me." It was one of my favorite songs to sing solo and I knew it would work in Greg's lower register. I started to sing the words and smiled at him. He smiled back at me and to my surprise he began to sing along...in perfect harmony. He did know all of the words and Cupid fired them straight to my heart. When the song came to an end, I held my breath as I stared deep into those dark brown eyes.

"You know the song," I said.

His eyes were filled with anxiety. "Was I OK?"

I nodded yes. "I think we sounded really good, didn't you?"

The shy smile was a sharp contrast with the toothy greeting I received at the bar. "Yeah, I did. I know a lot of these songs, but I can't sing a high lead. My voice starts to crack when I sing up that high."

I could hear both Antonio and Jackie in my head telling me to ask him the obvious question. I took a deep breath. "Have you ever thought of singing duets Greg?"

He shook his head. "No, never. I've always been lead on my own, and I sing the rock stuff because it's a little more forgiving. They don't notice so much if you miss a note."

I decided to make a bold move and reached out to touch his

thigh. I rubbed my thumb slowly up and down. He didn't flinch and instead leaned his shoulder toward me. "Want to sing something else? More Everly Brothers?"

He nodded. "Sure."

"See if you know this one." I sang the first "Dream..." and he joined right in. I gazed into his eyes while we sang “All I Have To Do Is Dream” together. It was much more fun than I ever expected. Before I knew it, minutes stretched into almost three hours. It was like sitting around with friends in college listening to different songs and singing along to the records. The difference was this time Greg and I were the only voices, and I was playing the music. It was just our two voices. He didn't know a few of the songs. He sat quietly while I sang my heart out on those. I even sang a short medley of Gene Pitney hits.

Finally I said, "Just one more song."

Greg gestured toward me with an open hand. "I'll join in if I know it." He laughed when he recognized the opening. It was "I Got You Babe." We did our best Sonny and Cher imitations. The big surprise came at the end of the song. Greg wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and kissed me on the lips. It wasn't a little peck. It was a full kiss that caused bolts of electricity to race up my spine. Our tongues twined together, and I wrapped my arms around his neck pulling him close. We were both breathless when it was over.

Greg spoke first in a whisper. "Was that ok?"

"Better than ok, Greg. I'm going to want more of them."

He stood up. "But I really do need to go. It has been great Daniel. We need to do this again sometime."

I climbed off of the bench saying, "Soon I hope."

He nodded. "Yes. Thank you...for everything."

With that comment he turned and made his way through my apartment for the door. I was confused about his hurry, but he didn't say there was anything wrong. Following behind him, I asked, "One more hug?"

He turned and I collided with him. He said, "Of course," laughed, and threw his arms around me.

I could feel his body shuddering slightly, but it felt so good. Our chests pressed tightly together and he gave me one more kiss goodnight. This time it was more like a sweet peck.

Greg waved awkwardly as he grabbed the doorknob. "I'll be in touch Daniel. I promise."

Breaking Rules

Antonio was pounding on my door at seven in the morning. I was still in bed, but the thump of his fist on the door was insistent. I was just starting to sit up when he called, "Daniel...let me in! You have to tell me everything!"

I stretched and yawned. "Antonio, use your key! I'm just waking up!"

That was all he needed. Before I could fully stretch again, he had jumped on my bed. Apparently, Antonio had just woken up, too. He was shirtless and barefoot wearing long pajama bottoms. He reached out and grabbed my shoulders then squeezed my arms with his long fingers. "Are you ok Daniel? Still have all your pieces together? You came home with him, and he was here for HOURS...did you do it you little devil??"

I shook my head. "I don't fuck on first dates Antonio."

He pouted. "There are always exceptions."

"We sang together."

Antonio's eyes opened wide. "Wait...that was the two of you singing? I thought you were listening to songs together. Seriously?"

I nodded and rubbed my eyes. "Seriously. We were singing together. It was fun."

He gripped my forearm. "It was amazing Daniel! What did I tell you about singing duets? You two...hot! But you've gotta cut his hair."

"Slow down Antonio. It's too early in the morning." I grumbled. "Can we get some coffee? And I need the bathroom."

He giggled. "Sure thing. I might just have to take the day off to hear all the details." Antonio bounded out of my bedroom and headed for the kitchen. I made a stop in the bathroom before joining him. I looked in the mirror and touched a finger to my lips thinking about the feverish kiss. Then I frowned remembering Greg's hurry when he left. I checked my cell phone again to make sure there were no messages from him after he got home. By the time I entered the kitchen Antonio had steaming hot mugs of coffee ready for each of us.

"And how was your night Anthony?"

He sighed. "Bingeing on *The Walking Dead*. It wasn't pretty. We're talking about you mon ami." He sipped the coffee. "I"m not kidding. You sounded good. I assumed you were playing music while you made out on the couch. You did get to make out didn't you?"

I whispered, "One at a time. It was so much fun Antonio."

He folded his arms over his chest. "I'm not going to say I told you so, but you know that I did."

"Yes, Jackie suggested it, too. He was really good. He knew

most of the songs. He knows how to sing harmony."

Antonio frowned. "Well, I can sing harmony."

I laughed. "No, Antonio, sweetie, you can't." I patted his arm.

He pouted again. "So you are getting together for a second date, I assume?"

"That's what he said." I tried to sound confident even though inside I had creeping doubts after he left so quickly. "I hope so."

Antonio reached out to squeeze my hand. "I've got a good feeling Daniel."

* * *

Thursday was agonizing. I didn't hear anything from Greg, and I was hesitant to make a call myself. I made a cookie delivery in the morning, but otherwise the day was free of normal work. I plunked melodies out at the keyboard trying to finish my song project, and I got nowhere quickly. Finally, I threw my hands up in frustration and went for a walk. Late in the afternoon I found myself at a park on the bluff overlooking Lake Michigan.

Traffic buzzed past behind me, but I didn't hear it. Instead, I found myself beginning to hum "All I Have To Do Is Dream," and I could hear Greg singing harmony in my head. I also saw his smiling face. I pulled my phone from my pocket and stared at the screen of recent phone calls. In most of my personal history, I was not the one who called after a first date. I waited for the date to call me.

My hand started to tremble slightly as I looked at the phone. I found my fingers punching in Greg's number. He answered after the second ring. His voice was whispery. "Daniel, hi. I'm so glad you called. I can't really talk, though. I'm on the floor."

Just hearing his voice made me smile. "Oh, I'm sorry. I can let you go."

"Thanks, Daniel. I'll call you back later. We've got to sing again...oh oops, later." With those words he was gone, but I was smiling. I stuffed the phone in my pocket and raised my arms triumphantly. Then I looked around nervously wondering if I had been noticed and slowly lowered my arms and slipped my hands into my pockets before I began the short walk home.

Greg called back late in the evening. It was nearly eleven when the cell phone finally rang. I was getting ready to click off the TV and head to bed. He explained that Slow Monkeys had a rehearsal because they were going out of town to Madison for gigs Friday and Saturday night. I sighed on my end of the phone wondering how long I was going to wait before our second date when he broke into his own story to say, "This might be crazy Daniel, but I miss you."

A smile spread across my face. "I miss you, too. That's not crazy. Wednesday night was great."

"Are you busy Sunday?

I tried to hold myself back from shouting through the phone when I said, "No."

In his deep voice, Greg said, "I can be there at eight."

"I'll be waiting. Any music requests?"

The breezy confidence was back in Greg's voice. "We'll make it up as we go along."

* * *

Greg brought a bottle of wine and held it out to me when I opened the door. I shifted back and forth nervously when I saw it. "Was I supposed to have dinner ready for us?"

He shook his head. "No. I just thought I needed to bring something." Greg looked awkward for a moment like he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do, but then he threw his arms around me and hugged me tight. I held on and stood on my tiptoes to rest my face against his neck. It was warm. His neck was long and tall like the rest of his body.

The bottle of wine was still in one hand when we pulled back from the hug. I offered to take it to the kitchen. "We can have some of that later. How about some songs first?"

Greg followed me to the kitchen and then to the studio room. We sat together on the bench and stared nervously at each other. I deliberated about whether I should initiate a kiss. Instead I launched into playing something I learned back when I was just starting piano lessons. My teacher had a book of pop songs.

"Hey, that's not 60s or 70s, and I love it even though I'm not supposed to." Greg started humming along.

"Not supposed to?" I asked and continued to play the instrumental line.

"Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton aren't cool with my music friends." Greg hung his head in mock misery. "I've definitely never sung 'Islands In the Stream' on stage."

I smiled. "But you can sing it now." By the end of the song we were singing in full voice to each other. Greg's deep brown eyes had a sparkle in them.

After three more songs, Greg placed his hand over one of my hands to stop me from playing. "I have to tell you something Daniel."

My heart caught in my throat. Nothing good ever followed a lead-in like that. I was certain he was leading up to something that I didn't want to hear. I asked innocently, "What's that?"

"This music makes me nervous."

I wrinkled my brow confused by the comment. "The music does...or do I somehow?"

He laughed. "You don't make me nervous at all Daniel. These

songs do."

I pulled my fingers off the keyboard. "I don't understand."

I watched as Greg took a deep breath then his long, tall frame hunched over for a moment before he turned back toward me. "It might sound really stupid, but I'm a rock singer. That's what Slow Monkeys do, but these songs....they hit me right here." He curled the fingers of his right hand into a fist and pounded against his chest. It was clearly something that had been bothering him. His shoulders heaved as he took deep breaths and looked into my eyes. "Do you understand?"

"I'm not really sure I do. Can't you enjoy both?"

He rubbed his hands on his jeans and looked down. When he raised his head again, his eyes were glassy. "Thursday at rehearsal. We were going through the songs. It was fine and all, but then in the back of my mind I heard you and I singing here in your house, and I wanted to do those songs instead. It happened again on stage in Madison."

I couldn't help it. I reached out and put my arms around Greg. He was silent, but he gazed into my eyes and then he kissed me. It was gentle at first, but then our lips didn't separate. His tongue pressed into my lips, and I parted mine to suck gently. Electric sensations raced through my body all the way to my toes. I scooted closer on the bench until our hips touched.

Greg responded like a man thirsting for contact. We continued to kiss. My lips were pressed hard against his. He rested one hand on my thigh, and I inhaled sharply through my nose. Lust seared into my brain. I wanted him so badly. My intellect was screaming, "Only second date," but it was starting to drown in physical sensation. One long arm of Greg's wrapped around my body pulling me closer while the opposite hand very slowly crept up my thigh. I knew that if his fingers moved any further, he was going to know how much my body wanted him.

Greg pulled back from the kiss, and we both gasped for breath. I couldn't believe it was me, but I whispered, "Bedroom?" He planted his lips on mine and then gestured for me to lead the way.

My breath caught in my throat as I glanced over my shoulder seeing Greg following me. I was carefully removing the pillows from my bed and piling them neatly on the floor when he reached out and wrapped an arm around me using his weight to push me backward on to the bed. His grip was strong and made the fall gentle. I was breathing hard while I watched him straddle me and pull his shirt off over his head. Then, in the tone of a gentleman, he asked, "Don't do anything that you don't want to do Daniel. Stop me if you're uncomfortable."

Breathlessly, I said, "I want you Greg."

He laughed a full-throated deep laugh and pulled my legs up on to the bed. I gazed up at his shirtless torso. He was thin, but his wiry frame was hung with sinewy muscle. Greg had solid pecs and a narrow waist. A trail of dark curly hair led down the center of his belly to the waist of his jeans. "Get rid of that shirt Daniel," he commanded.

I peeled off my shirt as quickly as possible to avoid more than seconds of losing eye contact with Greg. I shivered while I watched him inspecting my body with his eyes. I'm not as muscular as I would like to be, but I'm in pretty good shape. My body is mostly smooth naturally. I let out a low moan when Greg fell forward and began licking a slow circle around one of my nipples.

I might have been teaching Greg a few things about singing classic, soulful pop music, but this was my first lesson in his talents in the bedroom. In minutes he had my body vibrating with excitement and all sorts of guttural sounds leaving my mouth. I couldn't stop touching his body. I loved every inch of it. He didn't stop me when I began to fumble with opening his jeans.

When I had Greg's jeans unzipped, he climbed off the bed and pulled them down. His bright red underwear perfectly packaged his rock hard erection. The underwear came off next, and I swallowed hard when his thick, heavy cock appeared free from its restraint. Greg was forceful but also a perfect gentleman. I reached out for his cock with my hand and he climbed back on the bed offering it to my mouth.

I was in ecstasy sucking Greg. While my tongue worked its way from root to head and I let Greg's cock slide deeper into my throat, my fingers worked at my jeans. I quickly wriggled out of both them and my underwear. We were both naked on my bed.

Greg didn't let up. He came after my body with a hunger and intensity that drove me insane with lust. While we kissed, he reached down and stroked our rock hard cocks together as one. I reached my arm to the nightstand and fumbled for the drawer. He murmured, "Fuck yes," when I pulled out a condom and dropped it on the bed.

My brain was lost in a haze of carnal ecstasy when Greg pushed my legs up over his lanky shoulders and drove hard to enter me. It hurt at first, but I hadn't experienced that glorious sensation of being filled for months. I grabbed my own cock with one hand. Greg smiled and nodded at me then threw his head back and began pounding hard and deep into me.

We came nearly simultaneously. I'm certain Antonio heard it. Greg and I both bellowed like bulls. He murmured, "Fucckkkk" when he pulled out and collapsed on the bed beside me. He looked a bit

sheepish and said, "I really didn't plan that Daniel."

I rolled over and kissed him again then said, "It was fucking amazing Greg. Shit, I'm still vibrating all over."

He laughed. "You're hot you know." We kissed hard. I let my hand roam all over his incredible body. It was warm and slicked with sweat. My hand came to rest over his pounding heart. I trailed kisses down the side of his neck and then rested my face on his chest. Greg held me tight against his body.

With his free hand, Greg reached up and pushed his sweaty hair up off his forehead. "To be honest Daniel, I thought you were hot when I first laid eyes on you at the festival. You weren't the only one feeling distracted. Then I saw you at the bar. I'm not faking it about the music. It's awesome how we sound together, but I've really kind of got a thing for clean cut guys."

"Is that clean cut or nerdy guys?" I asked.

He laughed. "Does it matter?"

I kissed his nipple and blushed. "No, it doesn't. I like tall, skinny guys."

Greg laughed. "Well, then you hit the jackpot, didn't you?"

Then we both said at the same time, "And you can sing." I laughed hard and slapped his chest. We kissed hard again, and I rolled over on to my back breathless. It was hard to believe that any of this was happening.

Greg said, "I really just came over to sing songs."

I responded, "And I hoped for more."

Over Night

The week swept by. Jackie and I were busy with orders for lunches and desserts during the week. Everyone was prepping for back to school which meant plenty of lunch meetings around the city. We prided ourselves on boxing up tasty and nutritious meals that were a step above anything ordinary. Jackie peppered me with questions about Greg, and I happily answered. She said, "He really sounds like a catch Daniel. When do I get to meet him?"

"Soon I hope. I'll see what I can do. Antonio is begging to formally meet him, too."

Greg's schedule was not easy to work around. He had two more rehearsals with the band during the week, but Thursday night we got together again. Date number three came off without a hitch. It was like plucking a perfect evening out of my dreams. I ordered in Chinese food, and, after sharing a bottle of wine with the meal, we sang for nearly two hours before ending up in bed together again.

Antonio stopped by for breakfast on Friday. That means he was pounding at the door at seven. "You two bitches are sizzling hot," he announced. "I had to turn my TV up louder just to drown out 'Oh Greg,' and 'Please Daniel!'" He snickered.

"Jealous Antonio?"

He reached out his long arms for a hug. "Do you blame me if I am? Does Greg have a brother?"

I shook my head no to both. "You want a frozen waffle? I don't really have a whole lot else except the misfit cookies."

Antonio tilted his head to the side. "Misfit cookies?"

"Oh, that's what Jackie and I call the cookies that came out a little misshapen and we can't put in the packages we sell."

Antonio laughed. "Well, how about a waffle and a cookie?"

"Coming up with coffee on the side. You'll be super buzzed and crash by 10." I turned around and started bustling around in the kitchen.

Grabbing a chair, Antonio asked, "So is everything perfect on cloud nine mon ami?"

I tucked two waffles in the toaster and pushed down the lever. While I worked on the coffee, I said, "Yeah, pretty much. He's so amazing in bed Antonio. I can't help it. Seriously, he is. He's an animal that knows what he's doing. But I guess there is one thing."

Antonio sighed. "There always is. He has a mole in the wrong place on his cock?"

I sighed in exasperation. "No!"

"Well, tell Uncle Antonio all about your problems Daniel. Let's see if we can work them out."

I laughed and pushed a plate with a waffle in front of him. I retrieved a bottle of syrup from the pantry and dropped that on the table as well. I spoke up after I joined Antonio at the table. "He seems worried about liking the music we sing together too much."

"Too much?"

I poured the syrup over my waffle. "Yeah. He said he thinks it distracts him from playing with his own band. He likes our songs better than what they perform."

Antonio looked confused as he chewed on his bite of waffle. "Can't he do both? I mean, I can enjoy you singing Daniel and then also look forward to hearing something in the club created during my lifetime."

I smirked. "I don't know. He is a little worried about it."

* * *

Sunday night Greg asked me out to dinner. We both dressed up, and he drove us to a trendy small plate restaurant downtown. Greg's hair was brushed back off his forehead, and he was stunningly handsome to my eyes. We clinked our wine glasses together across the table with a simultaneous, "To us!"

Greg explained more about his concern with the music. He said that it was becoming a distraction when rehearsing and performing with Slow Monkeys. I asked if we should stop singing and just focus on the dating. He gave me an emphatic no. I asked if he considered trying to put any of the older material into the Slow Monkeys repertoire. He explained how band politics blocked any of those considerations. Greg was the last member of the group to join. Their lead guitarist put the project together as his own version of a little local rock supergroup. The bass player was exceedingly popular among local fans. They were all pushing hard to get noticed at a national level.

I reached my hand across the table. "I never expected any of this. I do feel like I'm dating a rock star."

Greg blushed. "You sing better than I do Daniel. You know that…"

"But it's your voice that takes it all to a different level. Did you ever think about us performing live in public?"

Greg started to say something but then closed his mouth again. He knitted up his brow. Finally, he said, "I don't know if that would work. I've got the band..."

I said, "But it's a totally different sound. It's not like we would compete. There are a lot of people in the city that work in more than one project."

He sighed. "I would really have to think about it. What we do together is kind of...intimate, too, Daniel. It's sexy, don't you think?"

Greg hit the nail on the head. Singing with him was the greatest foreplay I had ever encountered. I was already conditioned to grow hard every time I heard his singing voice. I leaned across the table. "It's really sexy." We had a plate of stuffed mushrooms at the table, and I picked a tiny one up then popped it into Greg's mouth. He chewed with a big smile on his face.

"I have some songs for us to sing that we haven't tried yet. I want to sing them...before bed." We both laughed when I said bed.

"Different songs?"

I nodded. "Have you ever sung any Righteous Brothers?"

Greg shook his head. "You're really going to be pressing my skills there Daniel. You know I can't sing the high part, but the low part isn't much easier. I've tried singing along with the radio."

I leaned across the table again. "I'll give you a hint Greg. Something that makes it easier."

He raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"Think about sex."

* * *

Back at my house we warmed up with a little bit of Everly Brothers, then I told Greg we were going to work on the Righteous Brothers vibe. "You know if you squint really hard, the two of us look a little bit like them."

Greg laughed. "I guess you have a point there. I always liked the little blond guy. What was his name?"

"Bobby Hatfield." I pointed at the signed concert poster on the wall.

"Did you really see them in concert?" he asked.

I wrapped my arm around Greg. "No, and that concert was before I was born. I bought the poster on ebay. They are heroes along with Gene Pitney over there."

Greg nodded. "Yeah, I was gonna ask you about him. I don't think I know any of his music."

I grinned. "You will. I sang a little medley of his songs the other night, but I think your mind was probably on...other things."

"Oh...that's who that was. Yeah, those were hot...just like you." He leaned toward me and gave me a kiss.

"OK, save that for a little later..." I decided we would start out with something a little bit easier in the Righteous Brothers catalog. I sang the opening line for "You're My Soul and My Inspiration." I explained to Greg that it was his part, but I was giving him the words in case he didn't remember. He gave me a shy smile. "My dad has a greatest hits album. I used to sing these songs all the time when I was a little kid."

"I thought you said you didn't know if you could sing them."

He shrugged. "Well, singing them to myself and singing them well in front of somebody else are two different things Daniel."

I gave Greg the opening chords, and shivers ran up my spine as he began to sing the opening verse. I joined in at the chorus and we sang at the top of our lungs. I gave it my all on my verse. We closed it out with a huge crushing hug and an ardent kiss. It was all followed by a thumping sound on the ceiling.

Greg looked up. "What's that?"

"Oh, that's Antonio. Either we're drowning out his TV or he's applauding." I held my finger to my lips. "Ssshhh...be quiet for just a couple of minutes."

As I expected, we heard that unmistakable clomping of Antonio's big feet down the steps. Then he pounded on the door. I whispered to Greg, "There he is. You might as well meet him now."

I opened the door to see a huge toothy smile on Antonio's face. He was excited and spoke while waving his arms. "I just had to come down and say the two of you are amazing! I was just watching TV and then this gorgeous sound just drifted upstairs." He paused for effect. "Wow!"

Greg laughed and said, "Thank you."

Antonio gave him the once-over and asked, "Do I get a formal introduction Daniel?"

"Of course, and Antonio, why don't you join us for a FEW minutes."

He winked at me. "My pleasure."

I followed with the introduction. "Antonio, this is Greg, and Greg, this is my best friend Antonio. I'm never really sure exactly what I would do without him. I suppose I would do a lot of things."

Antonio reached up one hand in a claw formation and whispered a growl. He wrapped an arm around Greg and walked him toward the sofa. "And I've heard so much about you. I wonder if it's all true."

I headed for the kitchen. "Would you like anything to drink Antonio?"

"Bring me one of those fancy beers you keep in your fridge Daniel. You never drink them anyway."

I opened the refrigerator. "Coming right up."

Antonio rattled on. "What do you think of our Daniel, Greg? He is adorable, don't you think?"

I called, "I can hear you."

Greg laughed, but I think he was unsure exactly how to respond to Antonio. That meant Greg was much like the rest of the world. It took some experience to figure out how to handle Antonio. I carried beers for all of us into the living room. "Don't you know you

aren't supposed to put guests on the spot Antonio?"

Antonio cast an evil grin my direction. "The way things are going, this one won't be just a guest for long mon ami."

Greg laughed uncomfortably. I interjected, "Don't let Antonio bother you Greg. He's harmless unless you have any food around you are saving for later."

Antonio whispered, "Ouch."

Greg spoke up. "I think Daniel is a lot more than adorable. He's very handsome Antonio."

With a wink, Antonio said, "You've got this one trained very well Daniel."

I grinned. "Greg is honest. One of his many great qualities."

Antonio gave an obvious glance to Greg's crotch. "One of many..." He stood up. "Well, men, thank you for indulging me, and serenading me from below, but I must say goodnight. This dark cocoa beauty doesn't come without rest." He held out a hand to Greg to shake. "And very pleased to meet you Greg. I can see Daniel is in good hands, and arms, and..." He trailed off while Greg gave him a firm handshake.

I stood to give Antonio a hug. "And thank you for stopping by my friend. We'll have to all do dinner together sometime."

Antonio started for the door then turned his head for a moment. "And Daniel, don't do anything I wouldn't do..."

I smiled. "There's not a lot..." The door shut before I could finish my snarky comment.

Turning back toward Greg, I watched him take a sip of the beer and then quickly joined him on the sofa. "And where were we."

He pulled me close. "Does it matter?"

My heart pounded in my chest. I started to unbutton his dress shirt and stared into his eyes. The deep brown eyes pulsed with excitement.

"The songs can wait Daniel?" he asked.

I whispered, "I think so."

Greg didn't go home that night. He blew me away with his talents at fucking on the sofa, and then we followed each other naked to the studio room. We alternated singing solo to each other before an encore of "You're My Soul and My Inspiration." I wasn't completely finished. "I have one more thing to sing for you Greg."

I gazed at his naked body sitting next to me and could not believe my good fortune. I sang those first three words, "Ooh my love..." and Greg wrapped his arm around me kissing my neck. I delivered the most erotic performance of "Unchained Melody" I could have ever imagined. Somehow I managed to both sing and play with his hands roaming over my body and his soft lips kissing my neck.

Greg pulled me away from the keyboard before I could finish, and I sang the last words a capella as he led me to the bed.

I woke in the wee hours of the morning. Greg was lying flat on his back. The sheet was pushed down to his waist. He was perfection. I watched his chest slowly rise and fall with every breath. The corners of his mouth were turned up in a smile. I reached out and gently traced the trail down the center of his belly with my index finger. I smiled when I saw the sheet bounce as something below it stirred.

Leaning over Greg's body, I kissed a nipple and then licked slowly at it while it stiffened into a tight little nub. Greg shifted his arm wrapping it lazily over my back. I stopped touching the nipple until I was sure he was dozing again. I laid my cheek against his chest listening to his deep breathing. Soon I was asleep once again.

Greg had to wake up early. He had a work meeting at nine, and he had to stop by home to get dressed. I had a spare toothbrush still in the package to offer him. We brushed our teeth standing next to each other both trying to lean in to see ourselves in the small bathroom mirror. We followed the rinse and spit with a kiss.

I had coffee and a quick breakfast of sausage and eggs ready when he exited the shower. The clothes from the night before were rumpled, but he was still handsome in them. I was the happiest I had been in a long time. I could imagine repeating all of this over and over for years to come. In between sips of coffee, Greg said, "I'll call you after work. And Daniel, honestly, thank you."

I shook my head. "You're welcome of course, but I think we're both getting what we want, aren't we?"

Greg smiled. "Yes."

* * *

Five minutes after Greg walked out the door, my cell phone rang. I dug it out of my pocket. It was Jackie. "Daniel, sorry to call so early!"

"It's ok. I was already up. I just said goodbye to Greg."

I could hear a small gasp through the phone. "He spent the night?"

'He did."

"Well, Greg is sort of the reason I called. Are you two still singing together?"

There was excitement in her voice. I couldn't imagine what it was about. "Yes, we are. What does that have to do with your phone call?"

"Remember when we did that party for the Brixton family last spring Daniel?"

I searched my memory for a moment. "Yes, aren't they the ones with that huge mission style house out in the suburbs?"

"Yep, that's the family. Anyway, I got an extensive e-mail this morning from Mrs. Brixton. She was so happy with what we did in the spring, she wants us to cater a party for her and, I quote, 30 of her most intimate friends, in two weeks. It's crazy short notice, but I think we should do it."

I didn't need to consider it for long. "Yes, I agree. She would be a solid big ticket with other big ticket friends."

Jackie continued. "And the best part, Daniel. She asked if I knew anyone to ask who could provide entertainment on short notice. She is interested in an intimate music act to go along with the overall retro theme for the party."

"You're suggesting Greg and I?" I had mentioned singing in public to Greg, but I wasn't really sure I was serious about it when I brought it up.

"Of course, why not? I mean I haven't listened to the two of you together, but I know how you sing Daniel. You're great."

I sighed. "Jackie, you know it's two guys singing love songs essentially to each other. Are you sure she would be ok with that?"

She paused for a moment. "I understand why you would be concerned about that Daniel. She might live out in the conservative suburbs, but the Brixton family contribute a lot of money to liberal political causes. I really don't think gay men singing would be a problem."

I could feel prickles racing up my spine. Singing with Greg in public would be amazing. It would also be a good chance to try out whether forming a duo had any real possibilities. The audience was only 30 people so if it went poorly, we could just keep everything to ourselves in private and pursue other projects. "I'll ask him about it Jackie. I can't give a yes or no quite yet. Give me 24 hours?"

"I can do that, but it's only two weeks away Daniel, so I need to know...like...yesterday."

I braced myself against the kitchen counter as I thought about asking Greg. "Thank you Jackie, and thank you for thinking of me, I mean, us. I will be back in touch tomorrow morning."

I called Greg over his lunch hour at work. I told him that I had something to talk about in person. He told me there was a band rehearsal, but he would meet me for a quick sandwich for dinner on his way. "Can't you give me any hints?" he asked.

"Better just to wait in person. It's nothing bad, Greg, I promise."

I spent much of the rest of the afternoon pacing back and forth in the living room trying to figure out the best way to ask Greg. I was trying to sort out the easiest route to a yes answer. It wasn't guaranteed, but I pegged my chances at about 70%. If I thought hard maybe I could bring my chances up even higher than that.

* * *

We met at a little pita restaurant near downtown. I was waiting in line to order when Greg walked through the door. My jaw dropped. His hair was short. He waved from the door and then gave me a big hug in greeting. I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair. "It's short..."

He laughed and smiled. "Yeah, I decided I had been shaggy for long enough. Do you like it?"

I reached up and pushed on his shoulder then whispered in his ear. "Makes me want to do indecent things with you."

I grinned when he blushed in response. Then he asked, "So what's up Daniel? What's so complicated you couldn't tell me over the phone but so urgent you had to tell me tonight?"

"Hang on. Let's get our food ordered first."

We passed through the line and Greg couldn't keep his hands off me. It wasn't groping or unpleasant. It was just a touch on the elbow here, fingers on the shoulder there, and leaning into me. The affection was obvious, and it gave me goosebumps. After carrying our sandwiches to a table, I leaned forward and said, "I've had an offer for us to sing together in public. Honestly, I didn't look for this Greg, but I think it could be a good idea."

To my surprise, Greg said, "Yes," and then he grinned.

"Well that was easy. What changed your mind?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Don't ask. Rough times with the band, and I really like the music we sing together. Singing with you in public sounds like a lot of fun Daniel."

I described to him the phone call with Jackie. I explained about the Brixton family and the size of the crowd. Greg said, "I'm sure we can win over a group like that."

"We've only got two weeks."

His eyes opened wide. "Two weeks? We have to get to work!"

* * *

Jackie was more excited than me when I told her that Greg said yes. The next two weeks flashed by in the blink of an eye. Greg and I managed to squeeze in six sessions practicing songs together. We decided that we would do the performance with a simple setup of single keyboard and two microphones like we were using at my place. Our set list was a series of 60s pop and R&B duets. We tossed in our own take on "Islands In the Stream" for good measure.

A week ahead of the performance, Jackie called me and asked what Greg and I were calling ourselves. "What do you mean?"

"The name of your act Daniel. Is it just Daniel and Greg? Surely you have something catchier than that."

I sighed. I hadn't even thought about the need to give ourselves a name. "Let me get back to you on that, Jackie. Greg is coming over to rehearse tonight."

We were both stumped. I said, "I would have suggested D&G, but you know what that sounds like. Dolce and Gabbana. We're gay enough as it is."

Greg and I were lounging on the sofa together. He leaned his head back against the cushions. "Let's see. Let me think about it." He closed his eyes, but he kept talking. "It's just two of us. It's just the

keyboard and then two voices. Daniel and Greg. Greg and Daniel..."

"Wait!" I shouted. "Go back a few words Greg."

He opened his eyes. "What?"

"Where you were talking about us."

I could see Greg reflecting on his thought processes. "You mean us and the keyboard and the two voices?"

"That's it!" I shouted. I climbed off the sofa. "That's it! We'll call ourselves Two Voices!"

Greg continued to lean back. "Hmmm....Two Voices. It does have a sort of ring to it. Are you sure no one else is using it?"

"I'll Google it." Minutes later Greg was looking over my shoulder while I searched Two Voices using my laptop. Nothing significant came up. We had our name. Daniel Noland and Greg Warner were now Two Voices. I turned to gaze into Greg's brown eyes. "Do you like it?"

He put his hand on my shoulder. "I like it. We're Two Voices."

* * *

The day of the performance I was a nervous wreck. We decided that Greg would pick me up, and he drove us out to the suburbs. We arrived at the Brixton home an hour before the event was scheduled to begin. I busied myself with checking all of the food arrangements. I helped with the planning, but Jackie was carrying out the execution of the food with three of our most dependable contract workers. We both knew that I would be preoccupied with preparations for singing with Greg.

Greg and I were arranging the microphones and testing out the sound system when a beautiful older woman appeared. Although I would have pegged her age at early 60s, she was dressed in an elegant dress that drew attention to a still slim and fit body. Her jewelry, while understated, shone in the light with the sparkle of tiny diamonds. She held out her elegant hand to me. "You must be Daniel."

I offered my hand and shook lightly. "And you are?"

"Penelope Brixton. You and Jackie provided the most wonderful spread of food and drink for us this past spring." For the previous event, Mrs. Brixton was not able to be present due to a last minute illness. I was pleased to finally meet our benefactor.

I smiled broadly. "I'm so pleased to finally meet you Ms. Brixton."

She pointed toward Greg. "And who is this handsome man with you?"

Greg turned around as I introduced him. "This is Greg Warner. He is one half of our duo Two Voices."

Penelope leaned toward me as she held out her hand toward Greg. "He's handsome. I hope you're romantic partners too." I blushed

and nodded as they shook hands.

Greg graciously complimented our host. "Your home is stunning Ms. Brixton, but it still pales next to your own loveliness."

Penelope smiled. "And you know how to flatter, too. Thank you, but it's easy when you have a team to help you out. Jackie says you sing mostly 60s music?"

I nodded. "Yes, Righteous Brothers, Everly Brothers, R&B duets."

Penelope stepped forward and motioned the two of us to come closer. "I'm sure this wouldn't surprise the two of you, but I lost my virginity to the future Mr. Brixton in the back seat of a car to 'Unchained Melody' on the radio."

I watched Greg's jaw drop, and I was certain mine did the same. We planned "Unchained Melody" as the second to last song in our program. She waved her hand at us. "Oh, don't be shocked. If you plan to sing it, then it will bring back all sorts of very fine memories." She clapped her hands and stood up straight again. "Now I must go check everything else out to make sure preparations are moving along smoothly. Very happy to meet you gentlemen!"

She turned away and strode off as elegantly as she first appeared. Greg whispered, "Are you still going to sing it Daniel?"

"Why not. She is likely to feel like it's her own personal dedication. I think Penelope Brixton is someone we want to impress."

* * *

For the first hour of the party, I provided background keyboard music. Greg sat by my side and perused the crowd. About thirty minutes in, he headed to the buffet tables to gather samples of the catered goodies. I smiled while he slowly fed them to me as I continued to play. Every few minutes one small group of the guests would erupt into uproarious laughter.

"Daniel, it looks like a more energetic and fun crowd than I expected."

I turned to Greg. "What did you expect? They would all just stand around frowning in expensive clothes?"

Greg laughed and winked at me. "Maybe..."

We were both dressed conservatively. I suggested it as a throwback to 60s style. We both wore khakis pants and solid colored open collar dress shirts. Greg wore blue, and I wore green. When he picked me up, Greg said he wasn't sure that he could sing all decked out for work like this. I tugged on his collar, gave him a kiss and ensured him that he would be just fine.

Jackie did a fantastic job with the food. The appetizers were a wide range of bite-sized bits of seafood with a few trays of vegan concoctions for those with dietary concerns. She put together

homemade truffles as dessert tidbits. As Greg popped a truffle into my mouth, I reached out to him and straightened his collar. "Only minutes to go. Are you ready for this?"

He nodded. "I can do it if you can."

Our keyboard and microphones were set up on the back patio of the Brixtons' grand home. The setup was pre-wired before we arrived. It was a beautiful cloudless day, and the humidity was remarkably low for late summer. While the guests ate and chatted in small groups, chairs were set up for our audience. Approximately five minutes before our scheduled performance time, Penelope Brixton began rounding up her guests and encouraging them to sit. Everything was set to take place on time without a hitch.

I was comfortable until just a minute or two before we were scheduled to begin singing. Then the butterflies settled into my stomach and my palms began to sweat. I whispered to Greg again, "Are you ok?"

He whispered back. "I think this is a little crazy, but yeah, I can go with it."

We settled in on the bench behind the keyboards and Penelope stepped to the front of the crowd. She walked up to me and held out her hand for the microphone. I did my best to offer a full smile as I handed it to her.

"My friends, thank you all for coming out on such a beautiful summer day! I have a very special treat for everyone, but first I want to thank my friends Jackie and Daniel for the amazing spread of food and drinks you've been enjoying." Gracious applause swept through the small crowd. "Now, I have something extra special and completely unique for all of you. I already knew that Daniel had culinary talents, but I recently found out that he has other talents I was not aware of until just two weeks ago. I had a conversation with Jackie about quality entertainment, and she informed me that Daniel and his good friend Greg recently formed a singing duo. Let's give them a little applause for that." Greg and I both nodded our heads to accept the positive response.

I reached out to Greg and put my hand on his thigh. He leaned toward me and our shoulders touched. *We're really gonna do this.*

"Daniel has performed on his own. Ask him about his *American Idol* experience sometime. Greg is the lead singer in a rock band, but today they will reach back in time to share songs that just might be among your all-time favorites."

Penelope was doing a fantastic job with the introductions. I thought if we ever performed anywhere else, maybe we should bring her along.

"For the first time live anywhere, I bring you Two Voices!"

Penelope swept her arm out toward us and then handed the microphone back to me. I nodded to Greg and we launched into the Everly Brothers' "All I Have To Do Is Dream." A subtle "Ahhh" swept through the crowd, and I felt goosebumps rise on my arms. Greg was in perfect voice. I played the keyboard, but I stared into his eyes as we sang. So many of the songs would express the emotions that had been flowing between us since that chance meeting at the street festival.

Our set was a short one. We swept through a dozen songs in just over 35 minutes. I did my best to provide some banter between a few of the songs. I told good natured jokes about dating Greg and talked about growing up listening to my grandmother's vinyl records. I heard a few groans from the audience members who were middle-aged or older. The last three songs were perhaps the most difficult for various reasons. The third to last was the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'." It was a challenge vocally for both Greg and I, but we carried it with flying colors. The audience applauded long and loud in response.

Next, I spoke into the microphone, "This is for you Ms. Brixton." She held her hand to her chest and turned to gaze at her husband when she recognized "Unchained Melody." It was the only solo song out of the set, and I was terrified, but Greg high-fived me when I finished as our audience cheered and whistled.

The difficult songs were over. For our finale, we took the good-natured fun route and covered Sonny and Cher's classic "I Got You Babe." For the final two choruses we stood up from behind the keyboard and sang a capella inviting the audience to sing along. Penelope joined in and pulled her husband up from his seat. We added one more round of the chorus and had the entire room standing and singing along. No one sat when they applauded as we finished. I turned to hug Greg, and we shared a quick kiss. The kiss generated another loud surge in the round of applause. I turned to the side to see Jackie beaming and applauding. I'm not sure I had ever been happier in my life.

Break

I was still basking in the afterglow of our debut performance as Two Voices three days later. The night after the performance, Greg and I celebrated with dinner and a night spent together in the apartment. Our schedules were busy and kept us physically apart over the next few days, but we kept in close contact through text messages.

My excitement over the future with Greg performing and our relationship helped inspire me to get back to work on songwriting. I began plunking out the familiar melody over and over again. Finally, I heard Antonio's pounding on the floor in response to my playing. I ignored his protests and continued to try and work out a new verse to the song.

It was no surprise minutes later to hear Antonio's footsteps on the stairs followed by knocking on my door. "Come in, the door's unlocked!" I called.

The door opened and before I could meet him in the living room, I heard Antonio's voice saying, "I thought we were done with that! It's causing flashbacks Daniel."

"I'm so happy tonight that even you can't bring me down Antonio." I opened my arms for a hug and he grabbed me tight.

"Still riding on cloud Greg?"

I laughed. "Does it show?"

"I'm still grumbling because nobody took video at the rich woman's place, and I wasn't invited. How are we going to make you viral on YouTube mon ami?"

I smiled up at him. "I'm already on YouTube."

"55 followers doesn't count as viral Daniel."

I said, "Ouch, and you know it's more than that. Anyway, I don't think it's me that will be going viral. It's us. Greg even said he's not sure about sticking it out with Slow Monkeys. He said the rehearsals are filled with drama now."

Antonio plopped himself down on the sofa. "Why don't you get me a beer while you're up Daniel. Then tell me all the good stuff about this man."

I opened the fridge in the kitchen to retrieve a beer. "And there's some leftover hors d'oeuvres from a business meeting that Jackie dropped off."

"What is it?" asked Antonio.

"Chef's surprise. Probably some stuffed mushrooms and bacon-wrapped something or other. Does it matter Antonio? I know it's cold but that never seems to bother you."

"Bring it on Daniel." Antonio was stretched out full length on the sofa with his head on the arm at one end and his feet propped up

at the opposite.

"Someone died and made you king Antonio?"

He motioned like he was filing his nails. "That would be queen."

I handed him the box of food and a beer. "Do you ever buy any groceries of your own?"

I sat and he turned his head to give me a bright toothy smile. "Why would I go to the bother if I don't need to?"

Sighing, I leaned back in the chair and took a sip of my own lite beer. "So what do you want to know about Greg? I'm not going to tell you the juicy parts."

Antonio pouted. "But I love the juicy parts."

"Oh! I do have something to share. He cut his hair Antonio."

Antonio raised an eyebrow. "Did you make him do that?"

I pulled up a photo of Greg on my phone with his hair cut short and handed it to Antonio. "No, he just showed up with it like that."

Antonio held the phone up to his face and then out nearly arm's length. "Damn Daniel! He's one fine looking man. Do you loan him out for weekends?"

I laughed loud. "Don't you wish."

"So who was right about singing duets?" he asked.

I nodded. "Both you and Jackie. I defer to my closest advisers."

"Is this a thing now Daniel? I mean will we be seeing you at Summerfest next year?"

I set the beer on the coffee table and leaned forward. "You know...I really hope so. I think we can be really good Antonio, but I don't want to get in the way of Greg's band if he decides to stick it out. He has some close friends there."

"And he has a lover to sing mushy duets with... From what I hear fifteen feet above you, that's all still going strong."

"Uhh...yes, no complaints there, and that really is more important than the music." I picked up the beer and took another swig.

"Good. You have your pretty little head screwed on right Daniel. I'm proud of you."

I leaned back in my chair. "What's new in Antonio's world?"

He rolled his eyes. "Is there anything new? I won't bore you with work details from the university. So I guess there's nothing to tell."

"No new heartthrobs?" I asked.

"Have you heard two sets of feet headed up the stairs?"

I held out my beer toward him. "Be patient Antonio. Greg was a tall drink of water after a really long dry spell for me."

My cell phone rang. I pulled it from my pocket to see that Greg was calling. Antonio rolled over on to his side watching closely. "It's Greg," I whispered. Antonio smiled and returned to concentrating on the beer.

Greg was excited. He said it was about the band. Things were seriously looking up. I struggled holding the phone as he continued on about a big break. He said that Slow Monkeys had just received a contract offer to go on tour with another band as opening act. It would take them throughout the Midwest and possibly as far east as Ohio and as far south as Tennessee. I held the phone in stunned silence, and my hand began to shake.

"Please be happy for me Daniel." Greg's voice sounded anxious.

I said, "Congratulations," but I knew that he could tell my heart wasn't in it. I had so many thoughts that started with, "But..." I couldn't bring myself to say them.

"It's a huge break for us Daniel. Surely you understand. The band is talking about possibly relocating to Chicago for bigger and better things if the tour works out as planned. Maybe you can..." His voice trailed off.

The Chicago comment twisted the knife further. Chicago was only ninety minutes away, but it might as well be six hours. I knew of multiple couples that split when one of them was lured to the Windy City for new jobs. In a flat voice, I said, "It sounds good, Greg." I was feeling numb.

"I'll call you tomorrow Daniel. Maybe dinner? I've gotta run for now. I have to call my family. They've always thought the music wouldn't amount to anything. They've always said I need a real career."

I didn't want the conversation to end on a down note. "That really is great Greg. I'm proud of you. Yes, let's do dinner." My voice was starting to break. "I've gotta go, too. I'm hanging out with Antonio."

I glanced over to Antonio, and he had a worried expression on his face. Greg said, "Thank you so much Daniel. I know you understand. Goodnight." He made the sound of a kiss into the phone and was gone.

I stuffed the phone in my pocket and immediately got up then sat on the sofa next to Antonio and laid my head on his chest before I burst into tears. He wrapped his long arms around me. "It's ok mon ami," he whispered. "Whatever it is, it's ok."

He held me tight in silence until the tears quieted down. When I could speak, I said, "He's moving Antonio."

His long fingers gripped my blond hair. "What? Where?"

I sighed heavily and tilted my chin up so that I could see his

face. "Well, it's not certain I guess, but he said his band might relocate to Chicago. They have a tour contract around the Midwest. I don't know how long the tour is. I didn't even ask. I don't know if it's weeks or it might even be months." I started to cry again and buried my face in Antonio's chest.

"Good thing this shirt needed a good washing anyway." Antonio raked his fingers through my hair. "That really sucks Daniel. He's deciding to do this all without even consulting you?"

I sighed heavily. "He's a musician. I think I understand. He's following the dream. I'd probably do the same thing." I snuffled.

Antonio raised his head and stared down into my eyes. "But wait...there's something here a little more than the music, isn't there?"

I snuffled again. "I thought so."

"Do you know what I think mon ami?"

I held on to Antonio's shoulder while I stared into his eyes. "No, but I think you're going to tell me what you think."

Antonio laughed. I needed to hear something a little bit lighter, and I smiled weakly. "Well, I think tall skinny boy is all excited about his big break, and he doesn't really know how to deal with all of it. He will sleep on it and calm down a little, and then he's gonna start thinking about that cute little blond butt in his bed. Mark my words Daniel. Give tall, dark and skinny at least 24 hours."

I laughed and pulled myself up to kiss Antonio's cheek. "Antonio, you're the best."

He nodded. "I know." Then he added, "And you're not staying down here alone tonight. I'm sure you've got some extra sheets somewhere, and I'm gonna camp out on your couch. Don't try to say no. I'll be right here resting my tired bones if you need anything."

"Antonio, you really are the best. You mean the world to me." I climbed off of Antonio and the sofa and picked up our beer bottles to toss them into the recycling bin in the kitchen.

Antonio called to me, "Besides, if he takes leave of his senses, there is a tall, dark chocolate drink that lives upstairs..."

I chuckled to myself and made my way to the linen closet just outside of the bedroom. "I've got plenty of sheets Antonio. Do you need a blanket?"

"Bring me one just in case." I carried the sheets and a wool blanket to the sofa. Antonio looked up. "Are you ok Daniel? Do you think you can sleep? I don't turn into a pumpkin for at least another hour if you need to talk."

I handed the sheets and blanket to him. "I think I'm ok. I think I need some rest. I'll feel better when I wake up in the morning."

Antonio nodded. "That's true. You will, but if you need anything, I'm right here. Just ask. If you need to make a voodoo doll,

I've got practice with that, too."

I sighed. "That comes later."

I was putting on a brave face for Antonio. I stopped by the bathroom on the way to the bedroom. My eyes were red and puffy. As I entered the bedroom, I closed the door behind me. Then I threw myself on to the bed, buried my face in a pillow and let the tears flow once again.

Tears

I slept fitfully through the night. I tossed and turned and had vivid dreams. One of them I remembered clearly when I woke up. Greg and I were a success as a singing duo. We were being praised on TV, our recorded music was selling, and we had a sold out concert tour. All of our dreams were coming true until, at the peak of our success, he dropped his microphone, walked off stage, and it was all over. I screamed "No!" in the dream. Then I screamed it out again. Then I was awake feeling Antonio's long arms around me.

"Bad dream mon ami. It's time you were getting up anyway, but you're gonna be ok."

I shivered in Antonio's arms. He held tight and rocked me gently. "Damn, I can't let this drive me crazy Antonio."

He ran his fingers through my hair. It was damp. I had been sweating through my dreams. "It's gonna be a rough day Daniel. Be good to yourself. Take it easy. I'll be at work, but if you need anything, call."

I rubbed his forearm. "I'll be ok. I'm getting together with Jackie in the afternoon. We'll focus on the business." I leaned my head back against him. "Thank you."

He whispered, "I gotta run, and I'll grab my breakfast on the way, but you take it slow. Take a long hot shower, not too much caffeine, and eat. Be good Daniel." He ruffled my air once more and then headed out.

I followed my normal routine, but I slowed it all down. I tried not to fixate on Greg. First was a long, hot shower. I stood under the water letting it run in long rivulets over my body. I soaped myself up and stopped my thoughts when they drifted to mornings waking up with Greg. I consciously dragged my thinking away from him and focused instead on food.

In the kitchen, I took longer than normal with breakfast. I chopped up vegetables and browned sausage for a hearty omelet. After I rolled it out gently on to a plate, I gathered up napkin, knife and fork along with the plate and took it all to the small cafe table on the back patio Antonio and I shared. It was a beautiful morning. The air was still warm, but a slight chill warning of fall to come was in the air.

As I ate, I looked around the backyard and groaned about all of the gardening projects I planned and then ignored over the summer. My mind was on other things and someone else. I finished up my omelet, took the final sips of coffee and leaned back in my chair with a heavy sigh. The day was not going to be easy.

After washing up the breakfast dishes, I busied myself with

cleaning in the apartment. When I focused on the project, I was extremely thorough with cleaning. I was in the midst of scrubbing the grout between the backsplash tiles in the kitchen when my phone rang. I hoped that it was Jackie, but my intuition told me otherwise.

I pulled the phone from my jeans pocket and looked down. It was Greg. I answered the call with the most cheerful, "Good morning" that I could muster.

I was taken aback by his first comment. "At least you are still answering my calls."

After a pause, I asked, "Why wouldn't I?"

"I never knew success could be so hard Daniel."

A flood of emotion tore at my heart. As heartbroken as I felt in the night, I didn't want Greg to be hurting. From his comments the night before, the concert tour was a real achievement. He was the band's front man. He was the focus of an audience's attention. They couldn't be moving forward without his talent shining through. I clenched my teeth and said, "I'm sorry."

"Can we have dinner tonight Daniel? I'm confused. I need to talk to you."

Dinner would be difficult, and it would be the first time I wasn't looking forward to being with Greg. I didn't want to see him while I felt so miserable. It was because I dreaded having the conversation that we both needed. "Do you want to go out?" I asked.

"I was hoping I could come over. I can bring Chinese."

Hurt lurked just below the surface in his voice. "Yes, what time?"

"I'll be there at 7:30."

I nodded and then realized he couldn't hear me nod. "Yes, Greg, I'll see you then. I need to go for now. I was in the middle of a little project."

His voice remained flat. "OK, and you have a good day Daniel. Please."

A tear rolled down my cheek when I said, "I'll do my best." He was gone.

Jackie was prompt as always. She knocked on the door at one. I was surprised to see that she brought lunch. When she threw her arms around me in a huge hug, I realized that she knew. I hugged tight and grumbled, "News travels fast."

"Antonio called me. He was worried about you."

Jackie worked hard to remain cheerful. She shared stories and information about the latest exploits of her family members both in Milwaukee and around the country. I ate the salad she brought stabbing at the greens while I listened. I even managed a few smiles at the more humorous portions of her tales. "Thank you Jackie. I'm glad

Antonio called."

She sipped her diet Cola and asked, "Are you seeing Greg today?"

I sighed heavily. "He's bringing dinner. We will talk about the future then."

She nodded. "I think that's good. How is he?"

I put my fork down. Another tear began rolling down my cheek, and I lifted my napkin to wipe it away. "He sounds miserable."

Jackie said, "I think that makes sense. It will be hard. You two have something special together."

The emotion suddenly erupted inside, and I began shouting. "But it's what he wants! This is the kind of success he has wanted for years. He's a musician! He should be happy about this. I wish I had never met him. I'm what's making him miserable Jackie!" I lowered my head into my hands, and my shoulders heaved as I started to cry again.

Jackie reached over and put a hand on my shoulder and began to rub. "It's not your fault Daniel. It's not his either. It's difficult, but the two of you can figure out a way to work it out together. I'm confident of that. You both need to want it."

I moaned. "I wish I had your confidence."

After a few more heavy sobs, I pulled myself together and left the kitchen for the bathroom. I splashed my face with water and stared at myself in the mirror. It was time for the drama queen to be put to bed for the rest of the day. I took three deep breaths, opened my eyes wide, and returned to the kitchen. The rest of the afternoon was uneventful. Jackie and I worked on our catering schedule for the next month. We sorted through the hours of help we would need from others and made plans for shopping and cooking days.

By 5 we were wrapping up and we were pleased about our productive afternoon. Before she left, Jackie gave me a kiss on the cheek and said, "You're gonna make it through this Daniel. I have a good feeling about it."

I tried to distract myself over the next two hours with TV. I watched cooking shows on the Food Network and then an hour of old *I Love Lucy* episodes. Lucy always got herself into dire situations and worked it out. Why couldn't I?

Greg was prompt and on time as usual. He had a white paper bag with the Chinese food in hand. We stared deep into each other's eyes when I opened the door and didn't say anything. He then threw his arms around me with the bag of food resting against my back. Greg kissed me hard. I had planned to avoid kissing or any kind of physical contact beyond a hug until we had the chance to talk and come up with ideas about the future. Greg ignored all of that.

My first visceral response was a welling up of anger inside, but then I was overwhelmed by the passion in both his hug and the kiss. My whole body shuddered when I parted my lips to let his tongue inside. I held his shoulders tight and I stumbled backward in his grip into the living room. Greg pulled back from the kiss and blinked three times. He said, "I love that."

I said, "You're going to miss that," and then was embarrassed by my petulance.

Greg frowned. "I guess I deserve that." He turned for the kitchen. I stood rooted to my spot and heard the sound of plates and silverware being gathered from cupboards and drawers.

When I heard the sound of plates being placed on the table, I joined Greg in the kitchen. He refused to look up at me and continued setting the table and opening the containers of food. He stuck a pair of chopsticks in each container. Before he sat, I grabbed his arm. "Greg, stop."

He looked up at me. His eyes were red and bloodshot. He didn't say anything. He only stared into my eyes.

"Congratulations Greg." I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. "You are amazing. Slow Monkeys couldn't do this without you."

He reached out and hugged me again. He whispered into my ear, "Daniel, thank you. I needed to hear that. Regardless of what happens, I needed to hear that."

I needed to be on the side of his supporters. I was not in the habit of burning bridges. We sat at the table and passed the containers back and forth in silence. "You're a rock star Greg." I managed a weak smile. "Just like when I first met you."

"Careful, Daniel, you're gonna make me all weepy again." He gazed down at his plate of food and took a bite with the chopsticks. "There's something I want you to come to." He looked up.

"What's that?"

"I understand if you can't come. Really, I do, but it would mean so much to me if you could be there." He sniffed, and I was worried he was going to cry. I hated to see him so upset when he should have been celebrating. I knew that his crying would make me dissolve into tears, too.

"If you want me there, Greg, I'll try to be there."

"Saturday night, Slow Monkeys is having a celebration concert up here on the east side. It should be a raucous crowd and a send off from some of our biggest fans." He set his chopsticks down and waited for a response.

There was a stone growing in the pit of my stomach the size of a baseball. I swallowed hard before I responded. "I'll be there Greg. Just give me the time, and I'll be there."

The rest of our time together in the evening was unusually quiet and subdued. By 9:30, Greg was preparing to leave. He hugged me and said, "Thank you for being understanding Daniel. I'm not sure that I would have been."

I walked him to the door. We kissed again, and it turned into a fiercely passionate, desperate one. My body was on fire and wanted Greg, but I knew that a trip to the bedroom would only make everything harder and more painful. We both gasped for breath as we pulled apart. I put two fingers to his lips and said, "Congratulations again Greg. I'll be there on Saturday. And you tear the house down, ok?"

He grinned, said "I'll do my best," and then he disappeared into the night.

I pushed the door shut behind him and pounded my head three times on it. To my surprise, I felt an unexpected sense of warmth spread through my body. There had to be a way to make this all better. There had to be a way to keep us from both being miserable. I just needed to find it.

Celebration Concert

Jackie excused herself from her family for a night to go with me to the Saturday night show. She told me that she couldn't let me go to something like that alone. She parked at the house,and we decided to walk from my place. It was only five blocks away. Minutes before we left, she sat me down in the living room. "Daniel, are you sure you really want to go? You don't have to do this. You congratulated him. He knows you're behind him."

"Jackie, I like him a lot. That hasn't changed. Hell, I might even love him. Don't you do hard things for the people you love?" The rock in my gut still sat where it had been for days. Going to see the show was one of the last things I really wanted to do, but I didn't see any other choice. Greg deserved my support.

Jackie shrugged. "I don't know Daniel. It seems to me like he made a choice. Has he even asked you to come along on the tour? Or at least be at some of the shows when they're on weekends? What about Chicago?"

I shook my head. "No, but I can't go anyway. I've got the house and the business. I don't have the money to go on the road. I don't have the money to live in Chicago either."

Jackie cocked her head to the side. "If he really becomes a successful rock star, he'll have the money Daniel. And what's the reason he can't do both kinds of music? Sing with the band and sing with you?"

I rested my elbows on my knees. "He told me that he still wanted to sing together...in private...whenever we saw each other."

"Whenever?..." She stopped herself from saying anything more. Jackie moved over to the sofa to sit next to me. She wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "Maybe it will be best to just let him go Daniel. It's going to be tough, but maybe seeing him sing tonight will help. Remember that I'm going to be right there for you. I'm not going to the show to see Greg. I'm going to the show to support you."

I hugged her tight and laughed a rueful laugh. "You know, this is all Antonio's fault. If he hadn't insisted that I get out of the apartment, I would have never met Greg. I would still just be plunking away at that song that doesn't even have a name and cooking good food with you."

"You aren't seriously going to blame Antonio for this..."

I laughed out loud. "No, but it's kind of fun to blame Antonio for anything. If I work really hard at it, I'll get one of those squeals."

Jackie laughed with me. "You've got a point there. By the way, where is he tonight?"

"He has a date! Can you believe that? I think it's been almost a

year. He was planning to come with us. It's probably for the best. I was a little worried he might charge the stage and throttle Greg."

Jackie rubbed my thigh. "He would only be putting into action what we all are thinking."

* * *

The bar was already packed when we arrived. We were still half an hour away from the time Slow Monkeys were scheduled to take the stage. I stopped at the bar to order beers for Jackie and I. There was a noisy, expectant energy in the air. Even with my conflicting emotions inside, it was difficult to avoid being excited along with the crowd. When I returned with the beers, Jackie was chatting with a woman I'd never met. They were both smiling and carrying on an animated conversation.

Jackie made the introduction. "Daniel, this is Rebecca. She tells me she did a lot of the booking for the Slow Monkeys tour. She's a promotions veteran."

I reached out my hand for a shake. "Great work then! It looks like the band is really going somewhere."

Rebecca shook my hand. She was a slight woman not taller than five feet two inches, but I could feel the energy vibrating from her handshake. "Jackie here says you are good friends with Greg? He is an impressive vocalist. He has tremendous raw charisma."

I wanted to smirk and say, "Don't remind me." Instead I nodded politely.

Rebecca made her apologies. "Please excuse me. I have a lot of rounds to make tonight. I'm very pleased to meet both of you. And Jackie, you have my card in case you would ever be in need of my services." In seconds, she disappeared into the crowd.

I turned to Jackie. "How did you meet her?"

As she talked, I took a sip of my beer and then wiped the foam from my upper lip. "She just walked up to me. She said that she thinks it's important to talk to the fans. She wanted to know how I found out about Slow Monkeys and why I was here."

I furrowed my brow. "You didn't tell her everything did you?"

Jackie put her hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry Daniel. I only spread good news about you, and I really don't think Rebecca cares much about you and Greg rolling around in bed."

We leaned against the wall for a few minutes. Then a couple at a small table in front of us picked up their drinks, pushed the chairs in, and joined a small group at the bar. Jackie and I didn't waste time. We grabbed the table. Seating was already at a premium.

Minutes later Greg walked up to us. "You're both here!" He was dressed just like when I first saw him on that stage at the festival. He was wearing a tight t-shirt that was probably a size too small. His

jeans were tight too. The only difference was his hair. Even though he made an effort to make it look teased and unkempt, it was much less shaggy than when we met. He put a hand on my shoulder. "You look good Daniel. I'm nervous as hell." Greg rocked back and forth from one foot to another to punctuate the point.

I stared up into Greg's eyes. I detected a combination of fear and excitement. "You're going to be great. You'll knock 'em dead Greg."

He let go of me and rubbed his hands on his jeans. "Oh thanks. I really hope it's good."

The man I recognized as the Slow Monkeys' lead guitar player walked up behind Greg and put a hand on his bicep. "Gotta get going Greg. Just minutes and it's showtime."

Greg reached out and squeezed my shoulder again. "Thanks so much guys! Gotta go!" He turned and followed the guitarist to the back of the bar.

Jackie reached across the table and grabbed my hand. "Are you doing ok?"

I nodded. "Yeah, ok is pretty much it. Not better and not worse."

"Hang in there Daniel."

We didn't have to wait long for Slow Monkeys to take the stage. Rebecca introduced them. She talked about their quick rise to the next step toward being a national touring band. She pronounced them the next great band in a long legacy of Milwaukee talent. As she was exiting the stage, they launched into an original song. It was all thrash and punkish energy. Greg was wired with ferocious electricity and had the audience in the palm of his hand.

While I watched him on the stage shredding his vocal chords with raspy yelps, I couldn't help but think of the gentler side of his voice harmonizing with me on "All I Have To Do Is Dream." I laced my fingers together and tried to block those memories from my mind. Instead, I focused on the man on stage. Tonight he was the man clawing his way toward success in a fickle music industry.

Jackie rubbed her thumb along the back of my hand. I watched the sweat bead up on Greg's forehead. I thought I saw him glance in my direction, but it's always difficult to tell for sure. Often, when you're on stage, either the entire audience appears to be plunged into darkness or you are moving around so much they are mostly just a blur of faces. Slow Monkeys performed four consecutive original songs. They didn't stop in between. At the end of the fourth one, Greg addressed the audience.

His voice was a little hoarse, but he thanked the audience for their support. "We can't do this without all of our fans! And we won't

forget you. Milwaukee is always our hometown!"

I cringed as he commented about our city. I knew that they were considering making Chicago their new home base. I wondered if there were other family members, girlfriends, or boyfriends of other members of the band in my position. I'm sure that something like this happened over and over. Chasing massive commercial success would always leave broken hearts in its wake.

Greg lifted the hem of his t-shirt to wipe sweat from his eyes. I sighed heavily seeing his bare chest. "Now we want to play a few old favorites for all of you!"

The band launched into their version of New Order's "Blue Monday." It was the song they played when I first saw Slow Monkeys at the street festival. I remembered Greg's comments about how dull the vocals were but how great the song was. I knew what would come next. I scooted my chair closer to Jackie. She glanced over at me with sympathy in her eyes.

Massive guitar chords led the segue into Joy Division's classic "Love Will Tear Us Apart." The words about loss when a relationship falls to pieces tore at my heart. Halfway through I stood up and told Jackie I had to go. She didn't try to get me to stay. She just nodded and followed me out the door.

I pulled my hands up to my head and shouted, "AGGGGHHHHH!!" Jackie gripped my arm to keep me from wandering out into the traffic.

"It's ok Daniel, and you did what you came to do. You showed your support. Do you want to stop for a drink or just go home?"

I turned toward Jackie. Something shifted inside. Tears didn't come. I wasn't sad. The sadness had turned to anger. I wanted to throw my head back and howl my frustration at the world. "You had better take me home. I might break something or hurt someone in a bar."

We walked in silence most of the way back to the house. Jackie was quiet, but she was calm, too. She wrapped an arm around my shoulders and held me close while we walked. My own body was tense. I opened and closed my hands making fists and then tried to relax. When we stepped on to my block in view of the house, I saw a light on upstairs. Antonio was home. I wondered if he brought someone along or if he was home alone.

At the door, Jackie said, "I really should go Daniel. I can get home just in time to tuck the little one in. Will you be ok?"

I smirked. "Other than a few broken lamps, I think it will all be fine. Antonio's home. If I need anything, he will be right down."

She threw her arms around me. "You're a great man and a great friend Daniel. I know you will, but I still want to say hang in

there."

I held her close to my chest. "It's better to feel this way. I was tired of crying."

She gave me a kiss on the cheek. "I'll see you on Monday. I'll give you a call if I find out anything."

I raised an eyebrow. "About what?"

For a moment she was flustered, and then she smiled. "Anything." I stared after her as she walked to her car, climbed in and drove off.

When I opened the front door, I heard murmurs from upstairs. There was a distinctive voice in addition to Antonio. He wasn't alone. I smiled for his good fortune. The positions were reversed, but at least one of us was having a good time. I opened the door to my half of the house and stepped inside.

My place was a mess. A series of days of wailing and gnashing teeth while only doing the bare minimum to clean things up and cook food will do that to an apartment. I vowed to myself that Sunday would be a day of serious cleanup before I settled on the sofa to drown my anger in mindless TV.

Rebecca

Monday morning I was still lying in bed at 8:30 trying to figure out how to structure my day. The anger was already starting to fade, and I was winding my way into some sort of acceptance. Then my cell phone rang. I didn't recognize the number. It was from an Illinois phone number. Normally, I don't answer calls from unknown numbers, but this time something was pushing me to answer. "Hello?"

"Daniel, this is Rebecca Forney. You met me last night at the Slow Monkeys show. Do you remember?"

I rubbed my eyes trying to remember. "Oh, that's right. You're the concert promoter?"

"Yes, that's right." She was speaking in a low tone as if she was making an effort to keep the conversation private. "I'm still here in Milwaukee. Could I meet you in say an hour or so?" She continued in a professional tone of voice as if she were setting up a business meeting. "There's a Starbuck's coffee shop in your part of the city. Would that work? I'll buy you the coffee and a pastry."

The hair began standing up on my arm. I had no idea what she wanted to talk about, but she was making it sound important. "Yes, I can do that. Do I need to bring anything?"

"No, I just have a simple matter I would like discuss with you. It's an opportunity, but I would much rather speak in person than start giving details over the phone."

I was dying to know, but I knew that I could wait for another hour. "Yes, of course. I'll be there at 9:30."

"Great, see you then Daniel."

At first I didn't recognize Rebecca. At the Slow Monkeys show, she was dressed in jeans and wearing a concert t-shirt. At Starbucks, she was dressed in a well-tailored, dark blue professional suit. She recognized me immediately and offered her hand. "Great to see you again Daniel."

I wished that I had dressed up more. I was wearing jeans, sneakers, and a basic solid colored polo. "Good to meet you, too. Sorry, I didn't recognize you at first."

She laughed softly. "I get that a lot after people first meet me at a show. They think I look like the rocker chick. They don't expect me to show up in my daytime business clothes. Let me buy you a coffee Daniel."

I fidgeted slightly with my hands. I was aware that I was being coddled by Rebecca and knew that she likely wanted something. However, she was keeping it close to her chest. "Oh, thank you. I'll just drink a basic latte."

She smiled and nodded. "Why don't you go find us a table, and

I'll be right over."

I found an empty table near a plate glass window looking out over the street. The close proximity to a music industry professional brought back memories of my experience at *American Idol*. I went into the auditions with huge dreams only to have them smashed by the panel of judges. The specifics of my performance had faded from memory. I was left with the experience of exiting in humiliation. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing up in wariness of Rebecca.

She seated herself across from me. Rebecca carried two coffees in a cardboard holder and a plate with a brownie in her opposite hand. "Do you like brownies Daniel."

"I do, but I might be too nervous to eat."

Her smile returned. She attempted to look warm and inviting. "Oh, please don't be nervous. I only have good news to share."

I sipped at the coffee. It was still too hot to drink. "Good news? About what?" I kept my hands wrapped around the warm cup. It gave me something to do with my hands instead of fidgeting.

"I don't know if you are aware of this, but I had the pleasure of seeing an amateur video recording of you and Greg Warner performing together."

My mouth dropped open. I didn't even have any video of Greg and I performing. "No, I didn't know about that. How did you..."

She interrupted me. "The how is not important at the moment. The fact that I really enjoyed what I saw is what's most important. In fact, I was so excited that I shared it with one of my colleagues at the next level of management above me."

My body tensed, and I began to sweat. "Someone...else?" I murmured.

"Yes."

"Have you talked to Greg?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, and I will get to that in a moment. I thought it was important to speak with you first. My colleague thought there is a niche out there in the music marketplace that would be very excited about what you and Greg have to offer. I'm inclined to agree."

"There is? Who?"

She locked her fingers together on the table. "In music, we are constantly coming around and recycling the past in the process of creating what's hot and new for the future. Male duos have been popular in the past, but it's something we're missing on the current adult-oriented pop landscape. My colleague really liked the combination of fresh, young faces with the professional presentation of some of the very best classic songs of the past. The fact that you are a romantic couple is only icing on the cake. Concerts are where the

money is today, and he believes Two Voices is a very marketable concept."

"But Greg is going on tour with Slow Monkeys."

Rebecca nodded. "This is where it does get a little complicated Daniel. Greg is very important to the Slow Monkeys tour, but my colleague and I are in agreement that we don't want to miss what could be an even bigger opportunity. So we have a proposal for you. Of course, later, you will need to speak with Greg and make sure he is interested, too."

"A proposal?" My head was already spinning. I couldn't imagine what she had in mind.

A month from now, Slow Monkeys will be in Chicago. "We have already lined up an opportunity for the two of you to sing in an intimate club there sort of as an 'after-show' following the Slow Monkeys Chicago debut. There will be at least three record label representatives there eager to see you along with invited members of the media. We will invite newspaper reporters as well as tastemakers from the blog world. With the lead time we have, it could be a sold-out buzzing crowd by the time you and Greg hit the stage."

My nerves clenched. I could feel my throat grow dry like cotton. "And what do you want from me?"

"Well, my suggestion is that you follow the Slow Monkeys tour so that the two of you can put in rehearsal time leading up to your Chicago showcase."

I struggled to speak in response. "Follow the tour? But I don't have money for..."

She interrupted me. "Of course we would pay for your transportation, accommodations and food. You also be guaranteed a portion of the profits from the showcase."

The conversation with Rebecca left me in shock. I stumbled out of Starbuck's shaking my head in disbelief. I was also wracking my brain trying to figure out where she got a video recording of Greg and I. I hoped that it was from the Brixton family event. I certainly didn't want to imagine video cameras set up somewhere in the house.

I took a slow meandering route walking home trying to clear my mind enough to figure out what to do next. I decided I would try to call Greg. Rebecca said he didn't know anything. I couldn't imagine not taking her up on her offer. As the reality of the situation sunk in, I began to smile. It really was an opportunity both for Greg and I as musicians and, potentially, for our overall relationship.

When I arrived home, I stood in the living room rocking from side to side and called Greg. The phone rang six times with no answer. He was likely on the floor in his retail day job. Greg's voice mail asked me to leave a message after playing a short excerpt of Slow Monkeys

music. I wasn't sure exactly what to say, so I just asked him to call. I told him that I would try again in the evening if I didn't hear anything and wished him a great day.

After pacing back and forth three times in the living room, I settled myself in front of the keyboard in my studio space. I sang "All I Have To Do Is Dream" solo followed by Gene Pitney's "Only Love Can Break a Heart." I smiled to myself after I finished the words of the redemptive power of love. I daydreamed about Greg and I on tour and recording an album. It was all an impossible dream come true.

At 11:30 Jackie called, and I was bursting with the desire to tell her everything. "Are you available for lunch, Daniel?" she asked.

Trying to remain calm, I said, "I can be."

"I'll be in your neck of the woods about noon. How about that new little deli by the hospital?"

"Sounds perfect." I shifted the phone from one hand to the other.

"What's up Daniel? You sound like you're about to explode with something."

I tried to speak in a flat tone. "Nothing urgent. I have a little news to share over lunch, but it can wait until then."

"News? At least you sound more upbeat than two nights ago."

I couldn't help myself from saying, "Yes, just a little more upbeat." I was beaming.

"OK, I gotta run. See you there at noon...on the dot."

* * *

"OK Daniel, I have a confession to make." Jackie was beaming, too, and she took a bite of her sandwich.

I had just told her what I heard from Rebecca and the offer for me to follow the Slow Monkeys tour. "Confession? You had something to do with this Jackie?"

She nodded. "Yes, and I hope you won't be too upset."

"Upset? I'm floating. What did you do?"

She leaned back and folded her hands across her lap. "Well, once you agreed to perform at the Brixton Family shindig, I asked Penelope if we could set up a hidden camera. I didn't ask very artfully. At first, she said absolutely not. She was worried I was trying to get some sort of damaging footage of her home or her friends and family. She informed me that they have some personal enemies among the more conservative neighbors."

"I can imagine that they do, and you are devious, Jackie."

Jackie laughed softly. "Well, after I explained to her that I was focused on you and Greg and had someone who was interested in seeing the two of you perform together, she was happier to help out. Honestly, Daniel, she was a little starstruck. You have a solid fan in

Penelope Brixton."

"Who were you sending the video to?" I asked.

"I did my homework. I looked up some of the top music publicists working the Chicago market, and that's how I met Rebecca. I didn't know until later that she was involved with Slow Monkeys, too."

I raised an eyebrow. "So that night at the Slow Monkeys show, she was scouting me out?"

"Yes. She loved the video, and she met Greg earlier at a Slow Monkeys rehearsal. She wanted to make sure you were for real. Daniel, she's called me three different times since Saturday night. They are serious about Two Voices."

I threw my head back and laughed. I couldn't figure out any other appropriate response. My world was spinning out of control, and I was loving it. "So you can handle the catering if I'm off following Greg like a groupie?"

Jackie reached her hand across the table and held it to my cheek. "Daniel, if this is your chance to be a star, I can't imagine standing in your way. Besides, good publicity for you and Greg is good publicity for the business. I already have been talking to a few new potential business connections through getting to know Rebecca."

I pressed my lips together and then spoke. "We've only got one more barrier to jump over now, Jackie."

"Yes I know," she said.

Simultaneously, we uttered the word, "Greg."

* * *

I waited until 8 p.m. to try calling Greg again. "Daniel! Damn, I forgot to call back. Life is really crazy. My head's kind of spinning."

I whispered, "It might get even crazier Greg."

"What do you mean? There's not anything wrong, is there? I mean, other than what I've screwed up already?"

I tried not to laugh, but even I could hear the giggle under my voice. "No, nothing wrong. In fact, things might be really right."

He responded in an indignant tone. "Daniel, spill it. Tell me what's going on. You know I don't like being kept in the dark."

"I talked to Rebecca today..." I let my voice trail off.

"Rebecca? Who's Rebecca."

"The publicist. She's the one working with Slow Monkeys. Remember?"

He paused for a moment. "Oh, right. She can be really funny. She stands there moving around me in a circle and staring at my face from all sides. Then she just says, 'Yep, perfect.' It cracks me up. Wait, why is she talking to you?"

I explained the entire story that Rebecca told me. I also

explained the filming of our performance at the Brixton Family event. Greg listened in silence. I told him that Jackie was willing to cover for me while we pursued Two Voices during the Slow Monkeys tour. I waited breathlessly for his response after I finished talking.

Finally, I heard Greg take a deep breath. "I don't know."

I was dumbfounded and crestfallen. "What?" I asked as my throat began constricting.

"It's so much to take in Daniel. I really have to think about it. I've been so focused on Slow Monkeys and shredding my voice to match the music. I don't know if I can go back and forth so easily."

I was silent. I could feel the tears start to flow. I tried not to let Greg hear.

"Daniel, please. I didn't say no. I just need to think. Give me a day or two...please."

I pulled myself together and wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. "That's fair Greg, but I can't wait long. Really, I can't. This seems like the perfect solution. Please say yes."

"Two days, Daniel. Just give me two days."

Live

Somehow the two days passed and I heard nothing from Greg. I started to call Greg on four different occasions then stuffed my phone back in my pocket. I promised him that I would give him two full days to decide. It was between 5 and 6 p.m. on Wednesday evening so it hadn't officially been 48 hours yet. Antonio arrived home and knocked on my door immediately.

He could see the answer to his question on my face. "No word mon ami?" he asked.

I sighed heavily. "None, and I'm about to go crazy. I keep trying to convince myself that no news is good news, but I don't really believe it."

Antonio wrapped his arm around my shoulder and led me to the sofa. "Can I share some good news?"

I stared into his eyes. "I could use that more than anything."

"Well, you know that guy Lex that I've been dating?"

I opened my eyes wider. "Yes. Don't tell me you're getting married..."

Antonio laughed. "No, but he wants us to be exclusive. You know, as in the big M." Antonio squealed. I couldn't help but smile in response. Antonio wrapped his long arms around himself and squeezed. "He's mine Daniel! Mine...all mine."

I gripped his thigh. "That's great news Antonio. You're doing something right."

He nodded emphatically. "Damn straight. I helped him figure out that I am Mr. Right."

I laughed. "Well, don't jump too far ahead..."

Antonio stood up. "Daniel, I think this is a cause for celebration, and, since you aren't doing anything but moping around here waiting for the phone to ring, you can come and help me celebrate."

I raised my head and stared up at him. Antonio was smiling from ear to ear. "What did you have in mind? We could just share a bottle of wine here in the living room."

He reached out and grabbed my hand. "No, you don't. We're going over to the bar and have ourselves two big thick, juicy, messy burgers and a big pile of cheese fries. If that doesn't turn that frown upside down, then I will be worried about you mon ami."

I frowned. "That's where I met Greg. Tonight is kind of bad timing."

"No, it's perfect timing. You've told me over and over you love the jukebox and you love the food. Let's go Daniel."

Antonio wasn't going to take no for an answer, and I wasn't in

the mood to put up a lot of resistance. "Do you want to go now?"

He looked at his watch. "Sure, we're right on...I mean, let's go. I need to make a bathroom pit stop first, but then we'll head out on the town."

When we left the house and started down the sidewalk, Antonio was in a remarkably good mood. I understood that the news about his boyfriend was something that made him very happy, but I suspected there was more. I stopped him half a block from the house and asked if there was more. He pursed his lips, shook his head and said, "No comment."

"Antonio, I'm not really in the mood for big surprises. I don't really want to make a scene at the bar. If you're moving out or something, just tell me right now. My nerves are a little frayed."

Antonio wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "Daniel, would I ever do anything to embarrass or upset you in public. Well, would I do that on purpose? We've had a few embarrassing moments in the past..."

I agreed with him. "No, you would never do anything like that on purpose."

"Well, let's just go and have big thick burgers and nice cold beers. You will feel better. Trust me Daniel."

The bar was unusually busy and the size of the crowd only served to stoke my suspicions. I didn't recognize anyone as a friend, but It was a heavy crowd for a Wednesday. Remarkably, one table was free, and Antonio ushered me in its direction right away. "Something is up Antonio," I whispered.

He ignored my statement and pantomimed being a server for the table. "Will that be the regular? Burger medium rare with cheese and an order of fries on the side?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, that's fine, and don't forget the beer. Something tells me I'm going to need it."

I was sitting facing away from the rear of the bar. I had a good sight line for the crowd continuing to file in from the street. Just as Antonio returned to the table, I could sense lights being turned on behind me. I turned my head to the right to look over my shoulder. There was a small stage for intimate performances at the rear of the bar. I could count on one hand the number of times Antonio and I were in the bar with a musician on the stage. What I saw made me turn my chair completely around.

The lights were focused on a single keyboard with two chairs and two microphones. I turned back to Antonio. His face was filled with a big toothy smiled. I said, "No...," but I didn't know what else to say. As I stared at the small stage and watched those in the bar gather closer to it, a familiar hand touched my shoulder and squeezed.

It was Greg. He leaned down and kissed my cheek. I reached up and rubbed the side of his face with my fingers. He whispered in my ear, "The answer is yes." I turned my chair around to see Antonio, Jackie and Rebecca all smiling at us. Greg whispered in my ear again. "Are you ready to sing Daniel?"

I laughed out loud. "Do I have any choice? It's been a few days. I think we might be a little rusty.

Greg wrapped his arms around my shoulders and chest from behind and kissed my cheek again. "Something tells me this crowd won't mind."

I looked from Antonio to Jackie to Rebecca. "You all three were in on this?"

Rebecca spoke up. "Well, Greg really did have a few doubts Monday night. He called me at midnight and woke me up. When you're in my line of work, that's not a big surprise. You get used to it. He was both excited and scared."

I grabbed Greg's forearm and gazed up at him. "And she had the right answers?"

Rebecca continued. "I explained who some of the people are who have high hopes for the two of you. By that time, I had already talked to three of the band members about it, too. They are all behind the two of you. In fact, they might all be here tonight. Once Greg understood how much interest and support is out there for the two of you, he said yes."

Greg leaned over and kissed my cheek again. His low rumbling voice said, "Which means you better give a killer performance tonight Daniel. This is the real thing."

"I think that means WE had better give a killer performance Greg. I can't do it without you. It's Two Voices, not one, remember?"

Antonio squealed and then held his hand over his mouth. Jackie rubbed his shoulder. Antonio said, "Sorry, I just had to let it out. You know me, I wanted to scream when we were still at home. I would have tied you up and carried you over my shoulder here tonight if I had to Daniel." Then he wiped a tear from his eye. "You two better make me proud."

I said, "I really need the bathroom for a minute. If you all will excuse me, and Greg, I'll meet you at the keyboard." I stood and hugged him tight. We shared a quick kiss on the lips before I scooted across the bar to get ready for our surprise live event.

I stared into the mirror in the tiny bar restroom. I wanted to break down and cry, but it was time to be the professional and go out and kick ass with Greg. We were being given our big chance. This was the beginning. We were stepping into the spotlight. We couldn't let anyone down. I raked my fingers through my blond hair brushing it

back off my forehead. I smoothed my shirt down and took a series of five deep breaths. It was showtime.

Greg was already standing by the keyboard. I joined him, and he gave me a quick kiss before sitting. The gathered crowd roared its approval. Rebecca pushed through the throng and introduced us like she introduced Slow Monkeys at their sendoff.

"Some of you may recognize Greg Warner here to my right. He is the lead vocalist for Slow Monkeys, one of Milwaukee's best rising rock bands." The crowd cheered and he acknowledged the support with a nod. "What you might not know about is his other musical project. With Daniel Noland here to my left, he has formed a duo known as Two Voices." Another round of applause spread through the audience. "It's a different style of music, but I'm confident you will like it. Consider yourself fortunate to be in the presence of the beginning of something big." They roared their approval once more. As I scanned the crowd, I could see Antonio's arms raised over the top of the crowd clapping, and I smiled.

Greg and I looked at each other, I nodded, and "All I Have To Do Is Dream" began. I could see the crowd swaying in time with the music. Greg leaned in toward his microphone with his eyes glancing at me as we sang in perfect harmony. The applause was thunderous in response. They quieted down as we continued working through our repertoire. 45 minutes later we came to the end of a set that matched our performance at Penelope Brixton's The difference was the raucous bar crowd shouting "I Got You Babe!" when the music came to a close.

It was a sea of cheering and high-fives as Greg and I stood grinning and taking bows. Jackie and Antonio pushed their way through the crowd to give us big congratulatory hugs. Greg's bandmates filed one after the other to give him hugs and shake my hand. The guitarist whispered in my ear, "Welcome to the tour." Jeff at the bar told me Greg and I had offers of about twenty free drinks from the gathered crowd.

Before she left for the night, Rebecca told me that Two Voices might have a place either to perform two or three songs before Slow Monkeys when they opened the shows on their tour, or we might get slotted in midway through the set. I smiled and nodded before receiving a big hug, but my head was swimming just trying to handle all of my emotion while taking in new information.

Greg, Antonio, Jackie, and I all walked back to the house together. We were shouting like a band of teenagers. Our noise set off a dog barking in the neighborhood. I put my finger to my lips. "Ssshhh."

Antonio and Jackie didn't stay long at the house. Greg and I were already in each other's arms and would not let go. We thanked

our two biggest supporters for everything and they exited quickly. When we were finally alone, I stared deeply into Greg's dark brown eyes. "Unbelievable."

He nodded. "But it's true Daniel. And a huge reason why is because you kept at it. You wouldn't let me say no."

"Me?" I asked.

He smiled broadly. "I guess we did have the help of a few other people."

I sighed happily. "I'm exhausted. Are you staying the night?"

Greg raised an eyebrow. "Is that an invitation?"

"Let's say it's a request."

Greg startled me by bending over, lifting under my legs and carrying me to the bedroom. He tossed me on to the bed and began to unbutton his shirt. "Let's consider my answer a yes, Daniel."

* * *

Thank you for reading **Two Voices**! I hope you have enjoyed it. Book 2 of the **Two As One** series. **Voices On Tour** is now available.

If you want to know when my next book comes out, just click the book below or enter the link in your web browser to receive your free story “First Kiss” and sign up for the Declan Rhodes Newsletter.

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Declan Rhodes is an emerging author of gay romance. He lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and loves men, cooking for friends, and a great walk along Lake Michigan…not necessarily in that order.

Continue Reading the *Two as One* Series:
Voices On Tour (Two As One Book Two)

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AMAZON

***

Until Kyle

By Beau Bishop

Chapter 1

"Dad," Layton called out again, the fourth time in as many minutes. He stood there in the entryway, waiting to be acknowledged.

Henry Law grunted and flipped a page but didn't look up from his newspaper.

"Dad," Layton said, a bit louder this time.

His father finally glanced up. His eyes were bloodshot from his evening brandy and a hint of irritation colored his voice. "What?" he snapped.

Layton lowered his eyes, defeated yet again. "I just wanted to tell you that I'm going out with Amanda tonight."

"Do what you want. I don't care," Henry said abruptly, bringing his newspaper back up to his eyes with a snap of the wrist.

Layton sighed and took a sip of his orange juice. A plate of crispy bacon and scrambled eggs, lovingly prepared by their housekeeper Maria, sat on the table in the dining room. He strode in and sat at the furthest end, far from his father, his meal in front of him. He'd never felt less like eating. His stomach was all done up in knots and he felt low, depressed. He shot another glance at his father, but Henry didn't look up from his paper. It seemed that there would always be this wedge between them after what happened with his mother.

Henry Law was the governor of the state of Tennessee. He was a wealthy, charismatic man who won the hearts of his voters through hard work and unwavering dedication. But ever since winning the election, his attention had drifted farther and farther away from his only son, Layton. Even when he was home, he spent long hours shut away in his study, pouring over papers and yelling at people over the phone. While Layton could have blamed the ever increasing work load that politics had brought into the household, he knew that their problems stemmed from further back.

Even before Henry had been elected, he'd treated Layton more like an unwelcome houseguest than a son. As he stared at his uneaten breakfast, Layton remembered how things had been when he was a child. They had been, for lack of a better term, a perfect family; his mother and father would take him to the park and to football games. He remembered how much they'd laughed, and the simple love

shining from his father's face. It was those memories he tried to keep close to his heart, especially with the coldness his father showed him now.

After Layton's mother had died in a car crash when he was fifteen, Henry had retreated into his shell, rarely showing his son affection and threw himself into his work. Layton supposed that he could sort of understand, but it still made his heart ache to feel the coldness radiating from his father. Sometimes he felt as if he'd lost both his mother and his father on that fateful day.

Layton took a bite of egg and bacon, feeling it go down harsh and tangled with the anxiety he felt. The sickly metallic taste rose back up in his throat, and he pushed his plate away and stood up. "I'm gonna go upstairs and see if Maria needs any help with the laundry."

He got a noncommittal grunt in response along with a wave of the hand. Layton cleared his throat. His heart was pounding. Just how bad were things when you felt as if your own father, the man who had raised you, was a complete and total stranger? "I love you, Dad."

Henry stiffened. The newspaper shook a little in his hands, but otherwise he gave no indication that he'd even heard his son. The silence was suddenly too loud for Layton; it seemed as if there was an invisible cloud swirling in the kitchen with them, a cloud comprised entirely of resentment and tension.

Layton was alarmed to feel his eyes sting with tears. He couldn't let them fall; he wouldn't. Not in front of his father, anyway. So he turned his back and walked calmly away. Although it felt more as if he was fleeing; fleeing from his father and the awful silence.

As soon as he reached the bottom of the stairs, the tears finally fell. Layton hated to cry worse than anything, but he couldn't keep them in any longer. He stumbled up the stairs, flung open his bedroom door, and sat on the edge of his bed and began to sob with his face in his hands, feeling both miserable and ashamed.

He finally got himself under control. He wiped away his tears and stood up. As he did, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror above his dresser.

He was an extremely handsome young man. He was tall, with broad shoulders that rippled with muscle. There was a dusting of dark hair on his chiseled face, and his bright brown eyes were framed with heavy lashes. Oh, he'd been popular in high school; with his stunning good looks, his money, and his father's rising fame in the world of politics, he'd never had a problem catching the eye of any girl he'd wanted.

He'd played football for four years, and in his senior year he'd started going steady with Amanda, the head cheerleader. After graduation, the two had gone on to separate colleges; she'd wanted to

go to a local junior college, and Layton, of course, had no choice; his father had forced him to enroll in the state university. He was currently in between semesters, but the thought of going back to the university in August made his stomach turn unpleasantly.

But he didn't mind being apart from Amanda. Although they saw each other every weekend, he'd begun to view her with weary indifference. He didn't know why. God knew she was gorgeous, and she was certainly the type of girl that the son of the governor was expected to have on his arm. But all he knew was how unhappy he was when he was with her. The embraces felt hollow and there was no spark that he saw across the faces of the other couples at the university.

The tears threatened to fill his eyes again, but this time he forced them away. For the first time, anger began to bloom in his chest.

It just wasn't fair! He'd worked hard, forced himself to be the kind of son that his father wanted him to be, and still he was treated like a burden and an embarrassment. Underneath his handsome, all-American-boy exterior, he felt as if he were made out of heavily cracked porcelain held together with thin glue. And it was all his father's fault.

"It's not my fault Mom died," he muttered underneath his breath. His strong, calloused hands clenched together as his anger blossomed and grew. He felt the nails cutting into his palm, but the pain didn't bother him. "Why does he take it out on me? What did I do?"

The anger persisted, gnawing at him in the pit of his belly, and he began to think. He could leave tonight, not tell his father where he was going, and Henry probably wouldn't even bother to find out what had happened to him. Just pack a bag and leave through the window, ending up wherever he ended up. No more disappointing looks from his father, no more days at the university when he really just wanted to learn a trade, and no more faking being happy around Amanda. He'd break up with her, but then he'd be faced with all the questions of what happened.

It had a certain attraction to it. Just leave his cold, uncaring father, leave his wealth and reputation behind, and just go. To be free to make his own decisions instead of "what looks best to the voters."

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. Where would he even go, though? What would he do?

If only there was a way to get back at his father, show him just how miserable he was. If there was a way to see if he even cared at all for him any more.

His eyes popped open as the beginning of an idea began to

form in his mind. He rejected it at first, and then went back to it. Over and over he thought of it. It was harsh, cruel even, but it was also a fine way to test his father.

Could it work?

He thought and thought. Finally he picked up his phone. It was sleek, the newest, most expensive model. He hated it and its complexity, wanting instead a more simple phone but his father had specifically bought him this one that he termed 'fitting of a governor's kid'. He had two missed calls and three unread text messages from Amanda, but he ignored them. His heart pounded and his hands shook a little. A mixture of trepidation and excitement filled his chest, and suddenly it was hard to breathe.

He pulled up his contacts and scrolled through them. He clicked on the name of someone he'd hadn't seen in almost two years.

Kyle McCreery.

He'd met Kyle at summer camp in his sophomore year. Kyle was as different from Layton as night from day. He was much more relaxed than Layton was, and he was as poor as Layton was rich.

He was also gay.

It had come as a bit of a shock to Layton when Kyle had confessed, but he'd got over it pretty quickly. Kyle's sexual orientation wasn't an issue to him.

Despite their differences, they'd hit it off and become pretty good friends. Kyle had a good sense of humor and was generally fun to be around.

But they'd been talking less and less over the last two years, and Layton hadn't bothered to get back in contact with him after their last conversation three months ago.

Would Kyle even want to speak to him after such a long time? And if he did, would he go along with Layton's plan?

Layton took a deep breath and pressed CALL.

The phone rang in his ear for what felt like an eternity. Just as he'd resigned himself to the fact that Kyle wasn't going to pick up, there was a small click and Kyle's deep voice answered cheerfully, "Layton, man! It's been a while. What's up?"

Layton swallowed. His throat seemed unnaturally dry. He chuckled. "Nothing much. How've you been?"

"Busy. I'm on probation."

Layton's eyes widened. "For what?"

"Breaking and entering and attempted robbery," Kyle said. He laughed. "Out of all the houses I've hit in my life, I had to pick the one with the big-ass dog. Got a pretty gnarly scar to show for it, and the cops got me just as I was jumping over the fence to get away from the fucker."

Layton's heart pounded. He'd known that Kyle had been stealing, he'd told Layton the last time they'd spoken, but it still came as a shock to him to hear just how far Kyle had progressed down that path. Layton, who never stayed out past curfew and who even obeyed all traffic laws, was actually talking to a criminal.

"Anyway, I don't do that shit anymore," Kyle was saying. Layton could just picture the easy grin on Kyle's handsome young face. "One time getting caught is enough."

"So you don't steal anymore?" Layton asked.

"Not from houses, anyway," Kyle said indifferently.

Layton cleared his throat and closed his eyes. "I didn't call just to chat, man. I need to ask you a favor."

"I'm listening," Kyle said, and Layton was surprised just how quickly the banality and good humor dropped from his voice. He was serious. Layton had never known Kyle to be the serious type, and it came as a bit of a surprise. "What do you need?"

Layton was a little touched. Three months without speaking to each other, and Kyle was still ready to drop everything and help him like not a single day had passed. He felt a little ashamed. Why hadn't he been there for his friend? Had he been that afraid of what associating with a petty criminal would do to his reputation?

He almost didn't speak. Who was he to ask Kyle for a favor, especially such a risky and dangerous one, after not speaking to him for so long? After all, it'd be Kyle's ass on the line if things went sour. He held on the line in silence for an uncomfortable amount of time.

But finally he went ahead with it. He took a deep breath and talked for nearly twenty minutes. It was odd how quickly he opened up to Kyle; surprising, but a little comforting at the same time. It was nice to finally get everything off his chest.

He started with the way his father treated him, how awful he made Layton feel, how he felt as if Henry wouldn't even care if anything happened to him. Then he explained his plan to Kyle.

There was silence on the other end. Layton's stomach churned. He was dreadfully afraid that Kyle would yell at him or simply hang up without saying another word, but after what seemed like forever Kyle finally said, "That's a hell of an idea."

Layton closed his eyes. "What do you think?"

"Let me get this straight," Kyle said slowly. "You want me to kidnap you?"

Layton nodded, then realized that Kyle couldn't see him nod and instead said, "Yeah. Yeah, that's right."

There was another long silence. Layton fidgeted uncomfortably. Finally Kyle said thoughtfully, "It could work, I guess."

Layton heaved a sigh of relief. “Really?”

“Yeah. But why?”

“I want to see if he’d even care.”

Kyle laughed. “That’s a hell of a stunt to pull, though. Couldn’t you just run away?”

“I guess I could,” Layton said slowly. “But…I don’t know. I want him to think I’m in danger or something, I guess. Want him to realize that at any given moment, he could lose me and the last thing he yelled to me may be the last thing he ever said to me.”

“I’m sure there’s an easier way to get attention from your daddy.”

Layton’s eyes narrowed and he clenched his fists. “Don’t put it that way. I’m not some attention-seeking brat. I need to know that he cares about me.”

“Hey, hey. I get it,” Kyle said soothingly, and he sounded easygoing and cheerful again. “But why me?”

“I don’t know,” Layton said. “You’re used to these kinds of things, I suppose. You know what to do without getting caught.”

There was a slight pause, and when Kyle spoke again there was a chill to his voice. “I may be a thief, but I’m not a kidnapper. I don’t do that shit.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Layton said quickly.

Kyle sighed, and the icy note left his voice. “Yeah, I guess I know that.”

Layton could almost picture Kyle rumpling his hair as he often did when he was under stress. “I’m just trying to figure out how we’re going to make this work.”

“So you’ll do it?” Layton asked, hardly daring to believe it.

“Hold up, I didn’t say that,” Kyle said, but he sounded pleased and a little excited. “First things first. Should there be a ransom?”

Layton thought for a minute. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“How much?”

“50,000?”

Kyle snorted. “Seriously? I bet your dad spends more than that every year on his dry cleaning. No, we need to go higher.”

“How about a quarter of a million, then?” Layton suggested.

“Hmm…that could work, yeah,” Kyle said thoughtfully.

A sudden thought struck Layton then. Kyle hadn’t once asked what was in it for him. “And you can keep the ransom money,” he added quickly. “That’s your payment for going along with this.”

Stunned silence on the other end. “Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t take that much money from you.”

“It’s not from me, it’s from my dad,” Layton said indifferently. “Besides, you’d deserve it. This is dangerous. Really dangerous. What if he gets the feds involved?” He swallowed. “You know what, never mind. We can’t do this.”

“Who says?” Kyle said indignantly. “You know what, I think we can pull this off.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Kyle took a deep breath and finally said, “You know what? What the hell. Let’s do it.”

Chapter 2

"God, you make me so horny," the feather-light voice of Layton's girlfriend Amanda drifted through the phone, its sultry quality sending a lazy wave of heat from the pit of his stomach down to his groin. He let out a shaky breath and gently ran a hand along his length, still at half-mast but twitching to life at the hesitant touch.

The bed creaked as he tilted his head back and tried to relax into the sheets, wishing he'd had a little more time to get comfortable before his girlfriend's call. He continued to coax his arousal to the sound of his girlfriend's voice.

It wasn't ideal, of course, but he'd take what he could get.

Layton grunted as he gave himself a particularly forceful tug, willing himself to feel the same heat that used to curl in his gut at the thought of Amanda's body, hot and quivering with a hunger that only he could satisfy.

"Lay, baby," Amanda mewled into the receiver, "I wish you were inside of me right now," Lay moved his hand over his dick a little faster, flicking his fingers over the tip. "My fingers are never enough, not compared to you."

"Shit," he whispered under his breath as his body stubbornly refused to comply. He wanted—no, he needed to get off, but even with the sound of Amanda's moans filtering through his ears as she neared her climax, Layton could only maintain a pathetic half-hard state.

It wasn't always like this; there was a time when even just the thought of his girlfriend could drive him absolutely insane. Her soft lips and her husky, measured tones that would whisper promises and sweet nothings against his skin; steady hands and full bodied curves that would press into him deliciously, pumping desire through his veins like a drug.

He had been an addict—addicted to her skin, her touch, the high that left him dazed and begging for more.

Layton loved her—at least, he tried to love her—so he kept on stroking, picturing her perfect hands and her perfect face and her perfect thighs against his, hoping that remembering

would somehow give him the release that he was desperately searching for. He licked his parched lips and ran a hand up his chest, trying to set fires where sparks no longer flew. The phone rested in his sweaty palm and Amanda was speaking, but he heard nothing.

Somehow, his thoughts of her soft hands turned into rougher, larger ones–not too much unlike his own– the swell of her breasts smoothed down to a taut, muscular chest, and he felt a stir deep in his gut that he hadn't realized he'd been missing up until then.

Caught in the moment, things he had long since buried in the darkest corners of his mind came bubbling back up to the surface, and he felt himself stiffen in his hands, toes curling and limbs shaking from the unexpected weight of his own desire.

In that moment, it didn't matter that the face that Layton saw in his mind was no longer Amanda's, but Kyle's, the shy but charismatic guy he had met at a summer camp a few summers ago; it didn't matter because the dam had finally broken and he felt himself getting swept away on a wave of pure ecstasy.

He moaned loudly and fisted one hand into the bed—the phone had slipped from his grasp and now lay forgotten within the folds of the off-white bedsheets—the other wrapped tightly around his weeping cock. He thrust upwards into the grip, pumping himself unsteadily at the same time. His hand was Kyle's, the phantom touches that traced his hips, his stomach, his chest, all of them were Kyle's, and Layton felt himself sinking down deeper and deeper, needier than ever.

And then as quickly as it had started, it was all over. Layton cried out and he curled in on himself sharply, spurting hot seed into his hand in thick, sticky ribbons of white. The abruptness of his descent left him trembling, both hands tucked into the sheets as he rode out the last of the aftershocks of his release.

For a moment he simply lay there, giving himself a moment to come back to his senses. Then he groaned, bringing his arm up to cover his face in embarrassment, as if hiding his eyes would somehow lessen the realization of what he had just done.

I was on the phone with Amanda, he thought, *but I got off to someone else. I got off to a guy.*

Regret. The cum cooling on his skin was warm compared to the ice that chilled the blood in his veins—of everything that was wrong with the situation. He wasn't gay, and imagining the hands of a man bringing him pleasure was wrong. Especially his, his mind supplied. It wasn't possible. How could it be, when he was happy with Amanda?

Layton turned his head towards where his phone had fallen and froze, hand still hovering over his face. The screen was bright, a speck of light in the suffocating darkness. Slowly, he slid his hand across the bed's surface, curling his fingers over the device and bringing it to his ear. Nothing.

Guilt resting heavily on his heart, Layton cleared his throat and took a chance. "Amanda, you still there?"

Faint rustling, followed by a reply, "Yeah, Lay. I am."

Silence. He didn't know how to react; she had been there the whole time, and by the sounds of it, she had managed to finish, even without him. He waited.

"You weren't very talkative today… is something wrong?"

His breath hitched as he felt an undeserving burst of regret swell in his chest, because this was his girlfriend, who asked all the right questions at all the right times. Right then and there he concluded that whatever had happened to him that night was a mistake, a one time slip up fabricated by his young and confused subconscious mind. He cared about her too much to even consider the possibility that he was gay—it was ridiculous.

They said their goodbyes and Amanda hung up the phone, and it was only then that Layton felt the mortification hit him.

It seemed that denial had a decidedly bitter flavor, and he was stuck with an entire mouthful.

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Layton anxiously leaned against the hood of his parked car. It was five minutes to eight. Kyle had promised to meet him at exactly eight o'clock.

Layton could never remember feeling this nervous and excited. He felt like a young kid breaking the rules; although at twenty-one he

was more than old enough to know that this wasn't a game. There could be very real, dangerous consequences. Several times throughout the day he'd come close to messaging Kyle and calling the whole thing off; it was just too risky.

But then he'd remember his father's coldness, the way he treated his only son like a dog, and his resolve would strengthen again. He took his cell phone and smashed it beyond recognition on the pavement below, making sure that there was no SIM card to be found.

He and Kyle had talked for nearly an hour the past evening, plotting their scheme and discussing details. "First things first, we have to make it look believable," Kyle had said. "If they even suspect that we planned this together, it's both our asses."

At first Kyle had toyed with the possibility of breaking into Layton's house to make it look as if he'd snatched Layton from his bed, but he'd quickly dismissed that idea. It was the governor's house, after all; there were alarms on every door and window as well as surveillance cameras and a ten-foot fence that encased the entire property. Also, as Layton's room was on the second floor, it would just be too hard to get up there and back down again before anyone noticed anything amiss.

Finally they'd decided on a plan of action. Layton nervously glanced around, but there was no sign of Kyle anywhere. Layton sighed and closed his eyes, his heart racing. If Kyle was late, that could jeopardize their whole plan.

Layton had called Amanda earlier and told her to meet him at the top of Bollinger's Peak at the outskirts of town. It wasn't a mountain, but a large hill that all the local college and high school students used as a meeting place and, occasionally, a make out point. He'd met Amanda there countless times, and he knew that it wouldn't seem too fishy. He also needed someone to be the witness.

Kyle would arrive and they would stage a struggle; Kyle had insisted on that. "Believability, man," he'd repeated. He'd leave the ransom note on Layton's car, and then they'd ride away together comfortably in Kyle's own vehicle. Kyle had insisted that he'd known a place where they could lay low for a while.

It finally occurred to him that he was placing all his faith and trust in a criminal. What was to keep him from turning on him? What made Layton think he wasn't going to screw him over? He thought back to summer camp, and how pained Kyle had looked with the other boys teasing him. They tormented him for being different than they were. No, Kyle was his friend, and he trusted him.

Finally headlights splashed across the dirt road, and Layton sat up straighter. Relief washed through him.

The truck pulled up beside him. It was red, but the paint was faded and peeling in many places. The door slammed as Kyle jumped out and approached Layton.

The first thing he noticed was that Kyle had put on quite a bit of muscle since Layton had seen him last. His shoulders were broad and defined, and his dark shirt clung to his flat, rippling stomach. A black tribal tattoo, also a new acquisition, encircled his muscular forearm. His dark blond, wavy hair fell across his forehead into his bright green eyes. He definitely wasn't the scrawny kid he was at age 18.

No one had been more surprised than Layton when he'd discovered that Kyle was gay. He sure hadn't acted like it; he looked and acted just like any other guy Layton had ever known. It had just proved to him how sheltered his life had been up until meeting Kyle. Of course, other than his father's friends' children, Layton didn't have too many friends of his own. Amanda surely didn't count. Kyle was barely in his life anymore. The others couldn't deal with the restrictions and rules with trying to hang out with the son of a prominent political official.

While Layton's nervousness showed in his face, Kyle looked cool, calm, and collected. He also looked like he'd lived in a gym for the past two years, with every taunt line of his body.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Kyle asked.

Layton hesitated, but only for a fraction of a second. "I'm sure," he said.

"All right, then," Kyle said pleasantly, and he drew his arm back and punched Layton on the jaw.

Pain sizzled down his face and he staggered, blackness blooming across his vision. He winced as he gingerly touched his jaw and felt the lump already forming on his skin. A small trickle of blood had started to seep from the gash.

"What the hell!" he cried.

Kyle shrugged. "I told you we had to stage a struggle," he said.

"You didn't have to fucking punch me!"

"Yes I did," Kyle said patiently. Then his fist was racing through the air again, this time colliding with Layton's nose. Layton shouted, his hands flying up to his bloody nose as tears of pain sprung up in his eyes.

"Fucking hell!" Layton cried out, blinded by the stabbing pain coursing through his body.

"Move your hands and lean over a little bit so some of the blood gets on the ground," Kyle commanded.

Layton glared at him but did as he asked, not wanting to have to go through another punch. Kyle's boots crunched through the

leaves as he crossed over to the bed of his truck. When he returned, Layton saw that he was holding a baseball bat.

"Move out of the way," Kyle advised, and Layton, seeing what he was going to do, hastened to obey.

Layton winced as Kyle swung the bat downwards, shattering the windshield of his sleek black Jaguar. His heart sank; he knew how important it was to make his 'kidnapping' look legit, but he loved that car. He tried not to watch, turning from Kyle but still able to hear the crack of the glass and the whine of the twisted metal.

Kyle, however, seemed to be enjoying himself. He brought the bat down again and again, shattering the headlights, denting the hood, and breaking the driver's side window. He pulled open the door. "Bleed on the seat a little," he commanded again, and for a moment Layton wondered why he was so good at staging a battle.

Layton sighed and leaned his head over the seat, watching the scarlet droplets of his own blood patter upon the fabric. The crimson stain started to form, and snaked its way through the fibers.

Kyle looked pleased. "All right, I think we're all set," he said. He pulled an envelope out of his shirt pocket and tossed it on the dashboard. "The ransom letter," he explained.

Layton nodded. His jaw throbbed painfully and his nose was beginning to swell, although it didn't seem to be broken and the bleeding had stopped somewhat. He blinked a couple more times to try and unblur his vision.

Kyle glanced around. "Now let's hurry up and get out of here before your girlfriend shows up," he said.

They hopped into the truck, which after the clean interior of Layton's Jag positively stunk of tobacco smoke and motor oil. Kyle cranked the truck up and tore away as fast as he could.

Layton leaned his head against the passenger side window and watched the scenery bleed away. Despite his pain, he felt his spirits lift. *We did it. I'm leaving this place.* He'd felt stifled and repressed, and now he could feel the stark reality of his own freedom. It was a wonderful feeling.

"Sorry about your nose," Kyle said, looking over at him and resting his hand momentarily on his knee. "I had to, man. Had to leave some blood so they'd know I'd roughed you up."

"It's fine," Layton said. He watched the trees thin and then disappear as they finally left the woods. Kyle's hand on his leg was giving him the strangest sensation and he was pleased when he removed it. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"A place," Kyle said mysteriously.

"What place?" Layton pressed.

"You'll see," Kyle said stubbornly as he shifted gears. He

caught a glimpse of Layton's expression and grinned again. "It's a good place, I promise. It's far away and they'll never think to look there. And it is somewhere that can never be traced to you."

"How far away?"

Kyle glanced at the speedometer. "We'll be there in an hour and a half, maybe two."

"Geez, that's a long drive."

"What, do you expect us to stick around so that they can catch us? No way. Kidnapping's a federal offense. I ain't going to prison. I'm too pretty for prison." A soft chuckle escaped him.

"I'm sorry I got you into this," Layton said.

But Kyle grinned yet again. It was a wild, mischievous grin, and for some odd reason Layton felt his pulse race. What the hell? Why was his heart beating so fast? He desperately tried to ignore it. "Don't be. I haven't felt this alive since that Rottweiler was chasing my ass up that fence. It feels good to be bad once in a while. Don't you know that?"

"I guess," Layton said, but he knew exactly what Kyle meant.

Kyle fumbled in the center console. "Cigarette?" he asked, offering out the slim red pack.

Layton had never smoked a cigarette in his life, but he was feeling reckless and wild, things that he normally wasn't. He took the cigarette and the lighter than Kyle offered.

On the first inhale he coughed so violently that his nose began to bleed again. Kyle threw his head up and laughed. Layton glared at him through his red, streaming eyes. He tried to take another puff just to prove to Kyle that he wasn't a pansy, but he coughed even harder the second time.

"Amateur," Kyle said, although not unkindly.

Layton was about to pitch the cigarette out the window when Kyle reached across the seat and grabbed his wrist to stop him. "Hold up, now, don't waste it," he said, and took the cigarette from Layton and settled it on his own lips, taking a deep drag and blowing out the smoke with an air of great practice.

Blood rushed to Layton's face as he watched the young man. There was something intimate about it; the cigarette had just been in his mouth, after all, and Kyle had put it in his own without any second thoughts. It was almost like kissing. It was a thought that should have disgusted Layton, but it didn't. In fact—

No, no, what the hell! I'm straight!

He forced the thought from his mind. He was straight, and that was that. No matter how much his heart raced and his hands shook, nothing could change that fact. He was just excited because of the plan, that was all, excited and strung up. Yeah, that was it.

He forced himself to look away from Kyle.

"Look, I want to apologize for something."

"What's that?" Kyle asked, throwing him a sharp look. He chuffed out smoke and shifted gears again.

"Not talking to you for so long."

"It's fine."

"No, it's not fine. It was a shitty thing to do. We're supposed to be friends."

Kyle gave him an odd look. "I don't think it really matters how often we talked," he said. "We're talking now, aren't we?"

"Yeah," Layton said quietly. He gingerly touched his nose. It was still sore and he could feel the blood crusted underneath it. "I just want you to know that I'm not using you or anything."

"Shit, I know that," Kyle said with a grin. He reached over and snapped on the radio. "Now enough of this girl talk. Let's listen to some tunes."

Layton had to laugh a little; it was lame, but funny in a way. Kyle had a way of making anything amusing. It was one of his gifts. Suddenly he almost felt a little high; high on excitement, high on adrenaline, and high on just pure happiness. He blinked, startled. The emotion was so rare that it felt foreign to him. How long had it been since he'd been happy?

They continued on their way for over an hour, sometimes singing along with the radio (Kyle switched the station to country music and sang along in a goofy, overdone drawl that made Layton laugh so hard his sides felt as if they were on fire), sometimes talking and catching up.

"So you're still seeing that same cheerleader chick?" Kyle asked as he flicked ashes out of the window—he was on his fourth cigarette already.

"Yeah," Layton admitted. "What about you?"

"Chicks aren't my thing," Kyle said cheerfully.

"You know what I meant," Layton said impatiently. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"Nope," Kyle said as he pitched the cigarette out half-smoked. "I'm in between guys right now."

Layton's heart began to beat fast again, and he was struck by a strong desire to change the subject. "Are we nearly there yet?"

"Almost," Kyle said.

They were in the mountains now. Layton had never been this far north in his life, and the thick forests and sheer rock faces intimidated him a little. The headlights of Kyle's truck splashed along the road as they meandered along.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, Kyle switched to

another road, this one a narrow, winding dirt road that sloped up. Layton had never seen mountains before, and he gazed out the window, fascinated.

After ten minutes Kyle finally slowed the truck to a slow crawl before shutting off the engine. “This is it,” he said proudly. “Isn’t it great?”

Layton leaned forward, his eyes fixed on their destination. “It’s perfect,” he said.

It was a tiny, cozy-looking log cabin surrounded by evergreen trees on either side. It was nestled up there in the high country, and Layton had never seen such a beautiful, secluded place in his life. It was fully dark, so he couldn’t see much of the surrounding area, but he hadn’t seen a living soul since leaving the highway over half an hour ago, and so he knew that they were completely alone.

“We’re over forty miles from the nearest town,” Kyle said. “They won’t think to look up here.”

Layton swallowed. He was a city boy, always had been, and the thought of living in such seclusion both excited and intimidated him.

Kyle swung open the truck door. “Well, come on!” he called. “Don’t you want to check it out?”

Layton followed him up the steps of the tiny porch and into the warm cabin, which smelled faintly of sap and wood smoke. The furniture was cozy but minimal, and the television was flanked by two stuffed deer heads that gazed flatly at Layton with their dull plastic eyes. The kitchen was likewise tiny, but spotlessly clean. Layton, who’d lived his entire life in enormous, expensive houses, had never seen such minimalism. He kind of liked it.

He walked through the rest of the cabin, noting the small bathroom and attached utility room. Then he stopped. “Hey,” he called.

“What?” Kyle answered as he rummaged through the fridge, which, along with the pantry, was fully stocked.

“There’s only one bedroom,” Layton said. “Where am I going to sleep?”

“It’s up to you,” Kyle said as he finally selected a beer. He pulled the tab and downed half the can in one swallow as he joined Layton at the doorway of the bedroom. “You can sleep on that couch in there, or you can sleep in the bed with me.” He grinned as he took another sip, but Kyle thought that his smile looked a little sad and strained. “Not that you’d probably want that. Not many straight guys ever want to sleep in the same room as me, much less the same bed.”

Layton could tell by Kyle’s expression that they were both remembering that long-ago incident at summer camp. Layton had

almost forgotten about it, but he knew that Kyle, as much as he might pretend to be macho and tough, would never forget.

"I'll sleep on the couch," Layton said. He saw the brief flash of hurt across Kyle's face and quickly added, "That bed's tiny. You won't be comfortable sharing it with me."

Kyle grinned again as he shifted the beer can to his other hand. "I've shared smaller beds with more people," he said. "I'll be fine, trust me."

Layton's heartbeat sped up again, and he could feel his cheeks growing red. Against his will, he found himself imagining the scene Kyle had described. "I'm good," he said. "The couch looks fine." Actually it was tiny, more like a loveseat than a couch, and Layton knew he'd have a hard time falling asleep tonight.

"Suit yourself," Kyle said with a shrug.

Soon afterward the two retired to their separate beds. Layton lay on the tiny couch with his legs hanging off the side. He was sore and uncomfortable, but he felt better than he'd felt in a long time. True, he felt a little weird, but he was sure it was just the excitement of finally breaking free from his father. Certainly he wasn't feeling attracted to Kyle. He was sure he'd feel different in the morning.

As he slowly drifted off to sleep, he wondered if anyone was looking for him yet.

Chapter 3

Layton sat up the next morning with a wince. He was sore all over, both from sleeping on the tiny couch and from the beating that Kyle had administered. He stood shirtless in front of the bathroom mirror, clad in nothing but a pair of pajama pants that Kyle had given him. He tried to shave, but his jaw hurt too badly. A bright purple bruise bloomed across the side of his face. He winced as he touched it. Damn, Kyle was strong. Did he have to do his job so well?

He was looking forward to getting a shower and feeling the hot water pound across his sore muscles, but before he could, the bathroom door swung open.

Layton whirled around. "Don't you knock?" he growled.

"Sorry," Kyle said cheerfully, sounding anything but. He was also shirtless, and Layton was dismayed to find his eyes drawn to Kyle's rippling stomach, smooth, tanned skin, and huge, muscular shoulders. What the hell was wrong with him?

There was a huge, white, twisted scar, clearly from the fangs of something, on Kyle's forearm, the one without the tattoo. Layton stared; he assumed it was the scar from the dog attack that Kyle had told him about. There was another scar, this one a deep, circular hole, on Kyle's shoulder. Before he could ask him about it, however, Kyle said, "You about to get in the shower?"

"Yeah," Layton said grumpily as he turned back towards the mirror. But before he did, he caught a glimpse of the way Kyle's eyes lingered across his own bare chest.

"Want me to join you?"

Layton's heart leaped in his chest and blood rushed to his face. His breath caught in his throat, but before he could respond, Kyle was roaring with laughter. "I'm kidding, man! Jesus, you should have seen the look on your face!" Chortling, he walked away from the bathroom and after a moment Layton could hear pots and pans banging in the kitchen.

His heart still hadn't resumed its normal pace, and his hands shook a little as he turned the shower on and slipped his pants off. He couldn't deny it anymore, as much as he wanted to. He was attracted to Kyle. He tried to push the fantasy from his mind, but he couldn't help imagining Kyle climbing into the shower with him, the water gleaming and glistening on his skin, the steam whirling and surrounding them, the way he would feel underneath Layton's hand—

He jerked himself out of his thoughts. No. No, he wouldn't think about that.

He got in the shower, not even bothering to wash his hair or

anything right away, just standing underneath the hot water, feeling it wash the tension out of his body.

He wasn't gay. He wasn't. He couldn't be.

He'd slept with ten girls in his life; hell, he'd been a young, hot, popular athlete. And he'd enjoyed it every time. He'd never had a reason to doubt his sexual orientation…until Kyle had come back into the picture.

He stood in the shower with his head down, water streaming down his dark hair and splashing back at his feet. There was only one thing he could do—continue fighting against his attraction and hope that things would go back to normal soon. He'd figure out what all this meant later, when Kyle wasn't around. In the meantime, he'd just ignore his feelings.

Feeling slightly better, he finished showering and stepped out, drying himself off. He stood naked in front of the mirror, his damp skin steaming with heat. His muscular chest heaved as he sighed.

He got dressed and wandered into the living room, where Kyle sat on the couch with his feet propped up on the coffee table, watching television and eating a sandwich.

"I thought you were cooking?" Layton asked curiously.

Kyle shrugged. "Yeah, I was gonna make you breakfast, but I got all the crap out and then realized it was too much work. I made you a sandwich, though." He pointed at the kitchen table, where a second sandwich sat on a paper plate. "I guess while we stay here you're going to have to do all the cooking, because I suck at it, to tell you the truth. Ain't that something? A gay guy who can't cook. You're actually lucky. At least that sandwich is probably edible."

"Thanks," Layton said as he picked up the sandwich and took a bite. He wouldn't admit it, not to Kyle, but he was a little touched that Kyle had thought to even attempt to cook breakfast for him. It was a nice gesture.

Kyle patted the couch beside him. "Come on, sit down. We don't do that kitchen table shit. Not here."

Layton eyed the tiny couch warily. It would be close quarters, and he was a little nervous at the thought of sitting so close to Kyle. But he didn't want to refuse, lest Kyle suspect that something was up, so he took his plate and sat down beside him.

Just as he suspected, it was cramped; his thigh brushed against Kyle's, and he forced himself to ignore it even though he could feel himself getting hard. He fought it and finally got his rising arousal under control by focusing solely on the television.

Kyle was flipping through channels, a bored expression on his face. He seemed to be waiting for something; he kept glancing at the clock, which read 9:56.

"Ooh, hold up, the game's on," Layton said interestedly as Kyle switched to another channel. It was a college football game, and it had just started.

Kyle snorted. "No way. Football sucks." He changed the channel.

"Change it back!" Layton said, disappointed.

"No," Kyle said stubbornly.

"Come on, man. Please?"

A mischievous glint appeared in Kyle's emerald-hued eyes. "Wrestle me for it," he said, holding up the remote.

Layton hesitated, about to refuse, but his eagerness overwhelmed him.

Besides, he really wanted to watch the game.

He lunged for the remote, but Kyle held it up out of reach. He grinned impishly, showing off his white, dazzling teeth. "Come and get it."

Layton lunged again and Kyle darted up off the couch, laughing. "Damn, you're slow! Didn't know they let old ladies play quarterback up there at Ruston High," he taunted.

Layton gritted his teeth. As Kyle laughed triumphantly, Layton seized his chance and leaped at Kyle, tackling the larger boy to the ground.

They rolled around, panting, wrestling for the remote, but Kyle was always one step ahead, keeping it just out of Layton's reach. Soon their young, muscular bodies sheened with sweat.

Layton discovered a dismaying thing, however; the more they struggled together on the ground, the more aroused he became. He finally stopped, seemingly to catch his breath but actually afraid that Kyle would discover his raging hard-on. *Please don't let him notice,* he prayed.

Luckily for him, Kyle chose that moment to glance up at the clock. "Shit, it's ten! I hope we didn't miss it."

"Miss what?" Layton asked as Kyle sat up and pointed the remote at the television.

"The news."

"Why are you watching the news?" Layton scoffed.

Kyle turned his head and gave Layton an odd look, as if he was slow. "You're supposed to be missing," he said. "I left a ransom note for a quarter of a million dollars in your busted-up car. Plus, you're the governor's son. When rich kids get kidnapped, it's always on the news." Layton fidgeted uncomfortably. He couldn't help the fact that he was rich any more than Kyle could help the fact that he grew up poor. "I just want to see if they're onto us."

Layton nodded. "Good idea." Honestly, however, he'd

temporarily forgotten about their plan, forgotten that they were in hiding. “I didn’t even think about checking the news.”

Kyle winked at him. “That’s why you have me around. I’m the brains of this operation.” He paused. “The brawn, too, actually. You couldn’t even get the remote from me.”

Layton aimed a punch at his shoulder. “Shut up.”

They focused on the T.V. The commercial that had been playing faded away, and the music announcing the midmorning news began to play.

The camera cut away to the anchorwoman, who shuffled a stack of papers on her desk before saying, “Our top story this morning; a shocking case of abduction and an unbelievable demand rock the capitol as the entire state gears up to find a missing young man. However, there’s a twist. Here’s Todd Thompson with the details.”

Kyle and Layton watched, wide-eyed, as the scene changed. The second reporter was standing in front of the governor’s mansion.

“Thank you, Miranda. Yes, the entire state is reeling with the news that Layton Law, the son of Tennessee State Governor Henry Law, was abducted from his car last night sometime between eight and nine o’clock.”

The footage switched. Now they were seeing Layton’s formally beautiful Jaguar, which was surrounded by men snapping pictures and searching for evidence. Some of the men were holding back dogs on leashes as they sniffed around the abandoned vehicle. If Layton had been looking at Kyle instead of the television, he might have seen the way the other boy’s face grew pale and still with terror as he watched the beasts.

“A ransom letter demanding a quarter of a million dollars by next week for Layton’s safe return was found in the front seat, where investigators found traces of blood. There’s no evidence at the moment that the blood belonged to Layton, although DNA tests are being conducted at the moment. There are no leads on the suspect’s identity.”

The scene changed again, this time footage of Layton’s father walking down the front steps of the courthouse while reporters crowded around him, bombarding him with questions. There was no expression on his face.

“Henry Law would give us no comment on his son’s disappearance, but sources say he’s gearing the state up for the biggest manhunt in seven years, and is expected to give a public statement sometime this afternoon. The FBI, along with SWAT and the state’s top investigators, are scheduled to arrive before then, and they assure us here at the station that they will be giving Layton’s abduction their full attention.”

Layton's heart sank. Manhunt? FBI? Dogs? He hadn't expected his kidnapping to cause that much of a stir.

For the first time, he was afraid. What would happen to them if they got caught?

Now the reporter was closing up the report, describing Layton and telling viewers to call a special hotline if they had any information.

Kyle changed the channel as they moved on to a different topic. Layton was shocked to discover that the other boy had a bored expression on his face.

Layton glared at him until Kyle looked up. "What?"

"Aren't you worried at all?"

"About what?"

"Getting caught!"

Kyle snorted. "You act like all this is a surprise."

"It kind of is."

"Hey, man, you're the one who wanted attention. You got it, so why are you complaining?"

Layton's face burned. There it was again; Kyle was making him feel like a bratty little kid throwing a temper tantrum. Didn't he understand that he wasn't seeking attention, but understanding and love from his own damn father? "It's not like that and you know it."

Kyle shrugged. "I'm just saying, is all. If you didn't expect them to throw this much of a fuss, then you're pretty stupid. You're the son of the governor. You're somebody. Me, if I went missing? They'd never even look for me."

"You don't know that."

A shadow dropped over Kyle's handsome face. "Yeah, I do."

Layton dropped his eyes. He wanted to keep arguing with Kyle, but he didn't know what to say.

He got up and wandered away, wanting time to himself to think, but there wasn't much space in the tiny cabin. So he stretched out on the bed, staring at the knotty pine ceiling and listening to Kyle laughing at something stupid on T.V.

Kyle might not be worried, but Layton was. The excitement was gone, replaced only with the nagging suspicion that it was all going to go wrong.

Chapter 4

For the next few days, both Kyle and Layton kept a close, watchful eye on the news. It was their only outlet to the world; there were no phones or computers in the cabin. Kyle had a cell phone, but it was an ancient model that didn't get service up in the mountains. So they watched the news, anxiously (on Layton's part, at least) waiting to see if they would pick up any new leads, but so far so good.

Layton didn't know if his plan was working or not yet, as he hadn't heard any statement from his father. Sometimes his confidence in their plan would waver, and he wondered if they'd done the right thing.

There was nothing to do in the cabin other than watch T.V., which soon lost its charm. So Layton and Kyle soon grew irritable and were constantly getting on each other's nerves. Part of Layton's frustration, however, grew from the fact that his attraction to Kyle had grown into full-blown desire.

His dreams were filled with sexy scenes and sensual fantasies involving his old friend, and he would wake up from them shivering and covered with sweat, simultaneously aroused and deeply ashamed. He couldn't explain the hold that Kyle held over him, but the other boy was constantly on his mind. Their close quarters didn't help matters in the slightest.

Three days after arriving at the cabin, Kyle and Layton sat on the couch side by side. Tired of cereal and sandwiches, Layton had attempted to cook cheeseburgers and French fries for lunch. But his entire life, either his mother or his various nannies and housekeepers had always done all the cooking, so Layton hadn't had the slightest idea what to do, with the result that the patties were blackened and had the taste and consistency of charcoal, and the fries were greasy and rubbery. Layton choked his down with a grimace, but the poor quality of the meal didn't seem to bother Kyle in the least.

When Layton mentioned how bad the food was and offered his apologies, Kyle waved his hand. "It's nothing. This is pretty damn good, considering some of the crap I had to eat on the streets." He squirted ketchup over the greasy fries and popped a few into his mouth before he realized what he had said, and his face drained of color.

"What?" Layton whispered. "When-"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"But-"

"I said I don't want to talk about it," Kyle said in a dangerous voice. "It slipped out, okay? Just forget I said anything."

"Kyle, you can tell me anything."

"No, I can't," Kyle said shortly. He tossed his plate on the coffee table. "You're right. This tastes like shit." With that, he stalked off to the bedroom and slammed the door shut behind him.

Layton stared at the closed bedroom door at the end of the short, narrow hallway. He felt bad, terrible, in fact, and none of it had to do with Kyle insulting his food.

Had he really been homeless? Layton tried to imagine how it might feel, and couldn't. He couldn't imagine how bad it might have been for Kyle. And where had he been, as Kyle's friend? Sitting in his mansion, no doubt, or enjoying his period of fame as the star quarterback, or maybe shagging a hot cheerleader in the back of the Jag bought with his daddy's money, all while his friend went cold and hungry.

He could hear music thumping from behind the closed bedroom door, loud, angry music, and Layton wanted more than anything to go in there and comfort Kyle. But he didn't dare.

He realized with a weary sort of indifference that, at that moment, he loathed himself.

Kyle lay on the big double bed with his arm over his eyes. He let the loud music wash over him, erasing the troubling thoughts from his mind.

He'd seen the brief flash of hurt on Layton's face, and he wanted to go apologize to him. He wasn't mad at Layton. He was mad at himself for letting his past slip out.

Layton thought he might know him, but he didn't. There was so much he didn't know. He didn't know how Kyle had been forced to start stealing in order to survive. He didn't know that, since the Rottweiler attack that Kyle had spoken lightly of, Kyle had been left with a near-crippling fear of dogs. His nightmares were haunted with the slobbering beasts, eyes red as blood and teeth as sharp as knives.

Maybe in time he'd tell Layton what had happened to him since they'd seen each other last, but not now. He couldn't.

Just like he couldn't tell Layton just how badly he wanted him.

He was much more observant than Layton thought he was; hell, he had to be in his line of work. He knew Layton was attracted to him; he could see it in the straight boy's eyes when he thought he wasn't looking, could see it in the stiffness of Layton's posture when they sat close to each other.

He wanted Layton just as badly.

Part of it was the fact that Layton was just so fucking hot; with his smoking body and his perfect face, he was probably the hottest guy Kyle had ever known. But it was more than that. Layton was his friend. He'd do anything for him.

But he wouldn't touch him. He couldn't do that. Layton was straight; he knew that. It was normal for straight guys to be curious from time to time. That's all this was, and he wouldn't do something that Layton would regret later. It was different for guys than it was for girls; girls could make out with each other at slumber parties and pass it off as experimentation while still retaining their 'straight' status. But not guys. Once a man even kisses another guy, he's labeled gay for life. He couldn't do that to Layton, not if this was just a passing thing.

But God, he wanted to fuck him. But more than that, he wanted to be with him.

The straight boy was off limits, though, and he'd just have to live with that.

He thought about summer camp.

He'd met Layton five years ago. They'd gone to different schools, but shared a bunkhouse at the camp. Camp had been lame—he'd only gone because he'd been sponsored by some old lady from the church up the road and he didn't want to seem ungrateful by turning down her money. Plus, he'd needed to get the hell out of his house. His mother had switched from whiskey to heroin by then, and things had been getting pretty bad around there since his dad had split. So he'd stayed at camp for a little over two months. It would have been pretty crappy if it hadn't been for Layton.

They'd become friends almost instantly. Layton was surprisingly modest for such a rich kid, and he didn't seem ashamed of Kyle in the slightest. He'd just lost his mother a few months back, and Kyle knew that he'd helped Layton cope with his grief.

With only two weeks left before camp ended, Kyle had finally come out to Layton and confessed that he was gay. He'd never told anyone in his life. Layton had been surprised, but he hadn't shunned Kyle; in fact, he'd reassured Kyle and urged him to embrace his sexual orientation. "There's nothing wrong with you," the sixteen-year-old Layton, just as handsome then as he was now, had said. "If anyone tells you otherwise, punch them in the face. Don't be ashamed of who you are. Never be ashamed."

They were words that Kyle had took to heart. He could never tell Layton just how relieved he'd felt to hear that, nor how much it had meant to him that Layton hadn't rejected him.

Not all the boys at camp had felt the same way. Kyle had come out to everyone, and it'd quickly become apparent to him that he was no longer welcome in the bunkhouse. The boys that didn't simply look at him like he was garbage had begun pelting him with rocks, calling him faggot and fudgepacker and fairy and other awful names. They'd told him that he was going to hell, and Kyle, bloodied and in pain and unable to escape the raining rocks, had never felt worse. Even now,

thinking about it, Kyle's cheeks filled with heat as he recalled the pain and humiliation that he'd suffered.

But Layton had stepped in and stopped it. He could never repay him for that. He was helping Layton now, but they'd never be even. Nothing could replace the warmth and protection of a good friend.

Lost in his thoughts, he finally drifted off into an uneasy doze.

Chapter 5

"No way."

"Come on. Please?"

"You're the one who was so damn worried about getting caught. Your face is splashed all over the media. You can't go with me. You'll be recognized and it'll blow our whole cover."

Layton sighed. "I'm so sick of staying in this house."

"This was your idea in the first place," Kyle said irritably. "You knew that you had to stay hidden from the get-go."

"I know," Layton said grumpily.

It was the next morning, and Kyle was getting ready to ride up to Masonville, which was the nearest town, for supplies. He'd stocked the cabin beforehand, but they were running low on a few things. When he'd told Layton of his plans, Layton had insisted on tagging along.

"You just can't, man. It's too dangerous."

"It's a hick town. They probably don't watch the news. I'll be fine," Layton insisted stubbornly.

Kyle sighed and rubbed the side of his face. He still didn't think it was wise, but he was anxious to leave. He felt antsy; Layton wasn't the only one who felt cooped up.

Also, he wanted to make Layton happy.

"All right, but you have to stay in the truck."

Layton grinned. Dimples popped up in his tan cheeks, and Kyle's heart skipped a beat. "Thanks."

They loaded up in Kyle's old red truck and headed out. Layton watched the scenery fly by out the passenger side window. He felt his spirits lift.

Kyle stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He'd been smoking less since staying in the cabin with Layton, but the five packs he'd stashed at the cabin were nearly gone. "So how're things with you and Amanda?" he asked lightly.

Layton sat up straighter, startled. It was a question he hadn't been expecting, and it was also a question he wasn't sure how to answer.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I mean I don't know," Layton said shortly.

"Well, come on, man. Talk to me." He exhaled, filling the cab of the truck with stale smoke.

"I think it's kind of funny that you want me to talk to you after what happened yesterday," Layton retorted.

He'd expected Kyle to get mad, but instead Kyle silently pitched the cigarette out the window and turned to face him. "Tell you what," he said. "You talk to me, and I'll try to talk to you. I can't, not right away, but I'll try. Okay?"

Layton was caught off guard, but he was touched that Kyle would consider opening up to him. "Okay," he said cautiously. "That's fair."

"Damn straight," Kyle said as he promptly lit up another cigarette. "Not that I am, anyway. Come on, spill it. What's going on with you and the prom queen?"

Layton leaned his head against the cool glass of the window. "I mean, I really don't know," he said slowly. "I mean, she's hot. She's a lot nicer than you'd expect, and she loves me. At least, she says she does."

"You don't love her?" Kyle asked shrewdly.

Layton sighed. "Yes, I do. But…not in that way."

Kyle lifted his eyebrows incredulously. Layton continued. "I guess I did at first, but after a while, I just didn't see her that way anymore. I don't have the heart to tell her I'm not in love with her anymore."

"You don't want to hurt her."

"Exactly."

Kyle gave him a sharp look. "You do know that you're hurting her more by stringing her along than if you'd just end it, right?"

Layton blinked, startled. "I guess you're right. I never thought of it that way." He felt like shit again. He was becoming more and more convinced by the day that he was a terrible person.

Kyle caught a glimpse of his expression. "Hey, don't worry about it. Relationships are confusing."

"You got that right."

They drove in silence, and after a while they finally left the mountains. Layton stole a glance at Kyle. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Depends on what it is," Kyle said cheerfully. But even as he said it, his hands tightened on the wheel.

"How did you get that scar on your shoulder?" Layton asked, pointing at the deep, circular scar on Kyle's bare, muscular shoulder. It was a hot day, and Kyle was wearing a shirt with the sleeves cut off,

and his arms and most of his chest was visible. It was an extremely distracting sight.

Kyle glanced at it. “I was shot,” he said shortly.

Layton’s jaw dropped. *“Shot?* Jesus, what happened?” Kyle was silent, and Layton felt as if he could press a little. “Did it happen when you were, you know, robbing houses?”

“No. This happened before. I never got hurt stealing,” Kyle said, and there was a trace of pride in his voice. “Except for the dog bite, of course. I was a damn good thief.”

“How did it happen, then?”

“We’re nearly there,” Kyle said loudly, drowning out Layton’s sentence. “I’m gonna run in the grocery store real quick and we’ll be on our way back before you know it.”

Layton sighed, disappointed, but he knew better than to push the issue. He would only drive Kyle further away, and he didn’t want that.

They pulled into the nearly abandoned parking lot of the grocery store, which was a tiny and grimy-looking building settled on the outskirts of Masonville, which was equally tiny and dirty. Kyle jumped out. “I’ll be right back,” he said.

“Hey, get me a Gatorade!” Layton shouted as Kyle walked away. The other boy waved his hand to show he understood.

Bored, Layton began looking around the cab of the truck. He picked up Kyle’s pack of cigarettes and put one in his mouth. He wanted to light it just to see Kyle’s expression when he came back out to the truck to see Layton smoking, but he was afraid of triggering another coughing episode. Disappointed in himself, he put it back in the pack.

What was taking Kyle so long? Layton drummed his fingers on the dashboard, getting anxious now.

His eyes fell on something lying on the dashboard.

He knew he shouldn’t be nosy, but his curiosity overcame him. He leaned over and picked it up.

It wasn’t a piece of paper at all, like Layton had first thought, but a photograph of a smiling family standing in front of a white farmhouse. At first Layton smiled, thinking it was a picture of Kyle’s family, and then his smile faltered. There were three children, two boys and a girl, but he knew that Kyle was an only child. Also, none of them, the children or the parents, had blond hair.

His heart beginning to thump as an unpleasant thought occurred to him, Layton tossed the photograph back on the dashboard and yanked open the glove compartment. Inside was a hairbrush, a makeup bag, a can of Skoal (and although Kyle smoked, he didn’t dip), and a bunch of assorted papers. With trembling fingers, he

picked up a stiff envelope. Inside was the truck registration papers.

The truck was registered to Reginald Carson, age fifty.

They were riding around in the middle of town in a stolen truck.

At that moment Kyle finally reappeared, his arms laden with plastic bags. “That store sucks,” he said as he loaded the bags into the back seat. “They only had single-ply toilet paper, so make sure you double up before you wipe your ass.” It was only then that he caught a glimpse of Layton’s livid expression. “Hey, what gives?”

Layton held up the registration papers with hands that shook with anger. “You want to explain this?”

“Oh, shit. Here we go—“

“You stole this truck!”

“Yeah, you wanna shout that for everyone to hear? Good idea.” He fumbled in one of the plastic bags. “Here’s your damn Gatorade,” he said as he threw the bottle at Layton and slammed the back door.

“I can’t believe you,” Layton growled as Kyle slid into the front seat and cranked up the engine. “I can’t believe that you’d do this!”

“I needed a car, man,” Kyle said angrily.

Layton threw his hands up in the air. “And you wanted to bitch at me about jeopardizing the plan! We’re driving around in this damn thing, and meanwhile the cops are looking for it. We couldn’t be more conspicuous if we tried.”

“Chill out, okay? I got it under control.”

“How? How do you have it under control?” Layton asked hysterically.

“You sound like a chick. Just relax. I got this.”

Layton fell silent, seething with anger. He couldn’t believe that Kyle would be so irresponsible.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Kyle was saying. “But I needed a vehicle and I had no money. You can understand that, right?”

“Is the cabin stolen, too?” Layton shot at him.

Kyle’s eyes narrowed. “No, that’s mine.”

“Are you sure?” Layton said with a derisive laugh.

“I’m pretty sure,” Kyle said stiffly. “I built it with my own two hands.”

Layton was temporarily caught off guard by this information. “Really?”

“Yep.”

Layton paused. He was still pissed off, but he was eager to keep Kyle talking. He was really curious about his friend, and until they’d began living in such close quarters, he hadn’t realized just how little he really knew about Kyle.

"When did you—"

"Oh, shit," Kyle interrupted, dismayed. Layton glanced behind them and his heart dropped to his feet.

There was a cop car cruising along behind them. The lights weren't flashing and the siren wasn't warbling, not yet, but Layton knew that the cop was probably running their plates first.

"Oh, no," Layton said in a voice strangled with fear.

"Calm down," Kyle warned.

"We're going to be in so much trouble—"

"I said calm down," he hissed. "Act natural."

Layton took a deep breath. He finally got his fear under control, but his stomach still rolled with anxiety and his hands shook a little.

Kyle's face was deathly pale, but other than that he looked relaxed as he cruised the truck along the road.

Layton's eyes kept shifting to the police car, which was now almost directly behind them. Was it his imagination, or was the cop looking at their license plate closely?

"I'm no amateur," Kyle whispered. "I switched the plates. But he could still check."

It was the most excruciating two minutes of Layton's life. He watched anxiously as the car tailed them so close that Layton could see every detail of the police officer's face. Finally Layton held his breath as Kyle turned on his blinker and turned onto a different road. Now it was a matter of seeing if the police car would follow them.

The black-and-white car slowed slightly…and then kept going straight.

Layton let out his pent-up breath in a sigh of relief. He couldn't believe their good fortune. Kyle let out a gleeful whoop and gave Layton a high-five.

"Told you, man! I fucking told you! We're good, we're good!"

"Yeah," Layton said with a goofy grin. He felt a little high from the adrenaline still pumping in his blood, although his hands were still shaking worse than ever from their close call.

Kyle laughed triumphantly and lit up a cigarette in celebration. "We got this, I told you so."

"We still have to be careful," Layton warned.

Kyle waved him off. "Yeah, yeah. We only have to get through three more days. Then we stage the hand in and go our separate ways."

A lump rose in Layton's throat at that. He was alarmed at how quickly his heart sank.

The fact was, he kind of didn't want to go home anymore. Kyle could get on his nerves (and there was the fact that his heterosexuality

was being put to the test every single day), but he was really enjoying his company. More so, now that he thought of it, than he'd ever enjoyed Amanda's. But more than that, for the first time in his life, he'd felt free. It was an intoxicating feeling.

He wondered if it was a feeling that Kyle felt often. On his own, no social constraints or pre-destined responsibilities. He stole a glance at Kyle's gleeful face, at his carefree eyes glinting with mischief, and decided that he probably did. Whatever problems Kyle may face, at least he was free.

Chapter 6

That evening, Layton sat on the front porch swing. He was watching the sun slowly disappear behind the mountains. There was a faint trace of wood smoke in the air from some distant fire, and in the distance a bird cried, but other than that the evening was calm and still.

Layton had slowly come to realize that he loved it out here. He loved the calmness, he loved the simplicity. He felt more at ease out here in the mountains than he'd ever felt in his life. It was as if a lifetime of stiffness had finally faded from his body, and he felt as if he'd been reborn. Corny, perhaps, but true.

Even so, he was terribly depressed. He had been ever since arriving back at the cabin earlier in the day. He supposed it was because Kyle had reminded him that he'd be leaving soon.

He tried to think of home. He tried to think of Amanda, but that didn't help. He thought of his father and wondered how he was doing.

Maybe, just maybe, when I get back home, he'll appreciate me, he thought. *He'll love me. That's all I ever wanted from this.*

But he still felt low. He wished he could stay here.

There was a creaking of hinges from behind him, announcing that Kyle had joined him. Layton smiled. He was actually kind of glad that Kyle was out here. Kyle, with his jokes and his gleeful nature, would make him feel better.

So when he turned around and saw the other young man's green eyes glinting with tears, he was momentarily stunned.

"What's wrong?" he asked, sitting up straighter in alarm. He saw that Kyle's skin was still flushed from sleep and his hair was mussed; he'd been taking a nap.

"Had a nightmare," he said in a low voice. "It was stupid. I just wanted to come out here and talk to you."

Layton was very still. Was Kyle finally going to open up to him?

He patted the swing beside him. "Come on, sit down."

Kyle sat, and Layton's breath caught in his throat when Kyle leaned his head against his shoulder. Kyle seemed to notice the way Layton stiffened, and he immediately sat up. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Layton said immediately. "It's fine, go ahead."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Layton said, trying to keep his voice casual and not betray the nervousness and excitement he felt.

Kyle leaned his head against Layton's muscular shoulder again

and closed his eyes. Layton waited for him to speak, but it was a long time before he finally did.

"You wanted to know how I got shot?"

"Yeah?" Layton hardly dared to believe that Kyle was finally about to talk about it.

"It was about six months before summer camp. I came out to my mother," Kyle said, and there was an expression of pain upon his face…but a little bit of relief, too. He'd kept everything inside for so long that talking about it seemed to ease a little of the pain. "I told her that I was gay. She was…" he had to stop and wipe a tear from his cheek. "She was fine, at first. She acted all calm, said that she was okay with it, and then went back to her room."

The sun was sinking lower and lower, casting them in dusk's shadow. Kyle continued. "She came back out about twenty minutes later. She was completely different. She was all tweaked out on something, meth, coke, I don't know. By then she was doing it all. She had the gun in her hand and was waving it around, shouting that she didn't want a faggot for a son."

"I was pretty mad, but by then I was scared, too. I told her that I was leaving, and she started yelling even more. She put the gun to her head and told me that she was going to kill herself."

Layton's eyes widened, but he was afraid to say anything. Kyle didn't seem to expect a response, however. He kept talking.

"I couldn't just stand there. She was out of her mind; if I hadn't stopped her, she probably would've done it. So I tried to get the gun from her. We fought for it, and…well, I don't think she meant to do it. I really don't. At the time I thought she'd done it on purpose, but now, looking back? I think it was an accident. The gun went off and hit me in the shoulder." He pointed at the circular scar.

"She just stood there with her mouth open. We were both in shock, I think. I was in so much pain, I couldn't even think. I just staggered out the door, covered in blood and holding my shoulder. She sent me to that summer camp after I recovered."

Layton finally found his voice. "God, that's awful," he said hoarsely. "What did you do next?"

"I lived on the streets for three years. I was faced with two choices—I could steal, or I could turn tricks. I chose stealing."

Layton swallowed. "I guess I don't blame you."

Kyle shrugged. "It is what it is. I managed to scrape up enough money to buy a little land up here, and I got the wood and stuff to build this place. Been living here for almost a year now."

"Wow," Layton said softly. There was silence as darkness slowly settled around them. An owl hooted from a nearby pine tree, causing Layton to jump with surprise. He finally felt compelled to

break the silence. “I didn’t know things were so bad for you. Why didn’t you tell me? I could have given you food, a place to stay—“

“I’ve never taken charity in my life,” Kyle said in a dangerous voice. He sat up, and the stiff set of his shoulders told Layton that he’d touched on a sensitive topic.

Layton bit his tongue; he wanted to say that it would have been better to accept help from a friend than break into houses, but he decided against it. The situation wouldn’t change either way, and he wasn’t going to cast judgment on his friend.

“I’m sorry. Look, thanks for telling me all this,” Layton said softly.

Kyle relaxed and leaned his head against Layton’s shoulder again. “It feels nice to get it all out, to tell you the truth,” he said. “And if I had to tell anybody, it would have been you, anyway.”

“Why me?” Layton asked. His heart had begun to race again.

Kyle sat up again and faced him. “Because I trust you, Layton,” he said, and his voice was just as soft.

Layton knew what was coming next, and part of him, the part that was so horrified by his desire for Kyle, cried out against it, urging him to get up and leave.

But part of him craved it, was eager for it, and so he stayed where he was, stock-still, as Kyle’s lips drifted towards his.

Their lips met in a soft, tender kiss, and Layton’s heart was beating so quickly that he was sure it’d burst through his chest. The intensity of the rush of desire that pounded through him was enough to make him gasp. He’d never felt this way when he’d kissed Amanda. Never.

Kyle’s emerald eyes were hazy and half-closed as he slipped his hand around the back of Layton’s muscular neck and pulled him closer. Layton melted against him. His hands went to Kyle’s hard shoulders, and somehow Kyle’s muscular body against his felt…right. There was no other way to put it.

Kyle’s hot, moist tongue swept across Layton’s bottom lip, and he trembled. The blond boy’s tongue slipped into his mouth, and Layton savored the way he tasted. His own rough, ragged breathing filled his ears as they explored each other’s mouths, tasting and nibbling.

He couldn’t remember feeling this aroused in his life. His thick, throbbing cock was so hard it was almost painful, and he was swept away in blissful abandonment.

They finally pulled apart. Kyle’s lips glistened with Layton’s saliva, and his cheeks were flushed and his eyes were bright with lust.

“God, Layton, you’re so damn hot,” Kyle murmured in a deep, husky voice that aroused Layton even further.

"So are you," Layton whispered. He was shaking.

"I knew how you felt."

"You did?" Layton said, swallowing.

"Yeah, for some time now."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Kyle shrugged and kissed Layton again, slower and deeper this time. "I just didn't want to hurt you by doing something that you'd regret later," he said softly. "But I couldn't stop myself. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Layton said. Regret would come later, he knew it would, but right now all he wanted was Kyle. He'd deal with his feelings later.

They kissed again, and Layton gasped a little as Kyle's hot, talented tongue caressed his lips. Kyle's hands were on him, on his chest and his arms, and when his hands dropped to Layton's flat, chiseled stomach and softly caressed right above the waistband of his jeans, Layton jumped as his desire shot through him as quick and intense as a lightning bolt.

Kyle's fingers grazed Layton's iron-hard throbbing cock, which strained at the blue denim of his jeans.

Layton trembled. "Don't," he said. He wanted Kyle to touch him, but he was afraid. There would be no going back.

"You want me to," Kyle breathed against Layton's lips. "You want me to so bad. I can feel it." And his hand, which had been softly teasing and stroking, tightened around Layton's hard manhood. Layton couldn't help himself; he moaned against the other boy's lips.

"Please," he said finally. He didn't care, not at that moment. If he was gay, so be it, but he wanted Kyle to please him, to touch him.

"You don't have to ask me twice," Kyle said with a lusty grin. Layton caught a glimpse of the blond boy's own erection and the sight of it sent another bolt of desire running through him. He wanted to touch it, to stroke it and tease it, but before he could, Kyle slipped his hand in between the waistband of Layton's loose jeans.

His fingers brushed the hot, bare skin of Layton's iron-hard shaft, and he couldn't stand it anymore; he ground his hips and groaned.

"Yeah, you like that?" Kyle asked, his eyes bright with lust. His breathing was ragged. "I know something you'll like even more." He pulled his hand away, and Layton's protests quickly faded away as Kyle leaned forward and, with incredible skill, unbuttoned Layton's jeans with his teeth. It was incredibly erotic, and Layton bit his lip to keep in the moan that that threatened to burst from his lips.

Kyle slowly pulled Layton's jeans down around his hips. His erection, still encased in the soft black material of his boxers, popped out. Kyle pulled them down and then it was free. Layton shivered in

the cool night air. His whole body seemed to hum with anticipation.

Kyle wrapped his fingers around Layton's cock. Layton closed his eyes and moaned as the blond boy slowly stroked him, alternating speed and grip, driving Layton nearly crazy with desire.

Just as he was on the edge of begging his friend to make him come, Kyle stopped and pulled his hand away.

"What are you doing?" Layton whimpered. He hated the way his voice sounded, so pleading and desperate, but he was powerless to help himself.

"Don't worry," Kyle breathed. "You'll get it." And he slid off of the porch swing and settled himself on this knees in front of Layton. His mouth was directly on level with Layton's cock.

Layton began to shake as Kyle leaned forward. His mouth was two inches away, then an inch, then half an inch.

"Come on and do it already," Layton groaned.

Kyle grinned mischievously. "You want it that bad, huh?" he panted. "All right, then." He propped his elbow on the wooden swing on Layton's left side, leaned forward, and slipped Layton's enormous manhood into his mouth.

Layton's hands sank into Kyle's thick, wavy blond hair as he gasped. God *damn,* it felt so good! Never in his life had he felt pleasure this pure and this intense as Kyle slowly and tantalizingly pulled his head back and then forward again, sliding Layton's cock across his hot, wet tongue.

Layton bucked his hips from side to side and wrapped his fingers tighter in Kyle's hair. The boy was so damn talented; he'd never received a blowjob this good from a girl in his entire life. He knew exactly what to do, and he was able to take all nine inches of Layton, something not even Amanda had been capable of.

Just as Layton felt his orgasm approach and then threaten to burst through him, the full reality of the situation hit home to him. Here he was on a porch swing over a hundred miles from home, pretended to be kidnapped by his friend, who was currently on his knees and sucking his cock. It was too much, and Layton pulled himself out of Kyle's mouth. Kyle's chin glistened with a combination of his own saliva and Layton's hot, salty pre-cum, of which there was an incredible amount.

"We can't do this," Layton said as he pulled up his jeans and buttoned them. He turned away, not bearing to look at Kyle, who was still on his knees with an expression of hurt bewilderment on his young, handsome face.

"Why not?" Kyle insisted.

"We just can't," Layton said. His voice thickened and his eyes stung with tears. And then the shame came, cutting into his heart like

a knife.

Kyle scrambled to his feet and approached Layton, who still refused to look at him. “There’s nothing wrong with the way you feel, Layton,” he said urgently. “You told me that back at summer camp, remember?”

“Yeah, well, I’m not gay,” Layton said angrily.

There was a flash of hurt mingled with what could have been anger in Kyle’s green eyes. “I’ve never met a straight guy who liked getting his cock sucked by me,” he retorted. “Admit it, Layton! You have feelings for me!”

“No!”

“Yes, you do,” Kyle insisted. “You can’t keep hiding from it.”

“I’m not hiding from anything,” Layton growled. “Leave me alone.” He turned away and stormed back inside the cabin. Kyle stood where he was, his eyes downcast and an expression of great sadness upon his face.

Chapter 7

Layton slammed the bedroom door closed and locked it. Kyle could sleep on the couch for once. It wouldn't kill him.

He flopped down upon the bed. He wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. He just felt numb.

The worst part was he was still aching with desire, and his erection had yet to go away. It begged for Kyle's touch, for the boy to slip his tongue across it, but Layton fought it.

The shame was so great, it burned inside him like a sun.

He couldn't believe what he had done. More so, he couldn't believe that he'd enjoyed it so much.

Was he gay? Was he? He didn't know. But Kyle had been right. He couldn't deny the fact that he'd loved getting his cock sucked by his hot friend.

Layton gritted his teeth and let his depression and horror wash over him. He was still in disbelief.

But oh, how he still ached for Kyle's touch.

He rolled over, ignoring his throbbing arousal. He just couldn't let it happen again, that was all. If that meant ignoring Kyle, even after all he'd done for him, well, so be it. Kyle would understand or he wouldn't.

He closed his eyes and was on the verge of drifting off to sleep when he heard the doorknob rattle.

He sat up straight in the darkness. The covers were pooled around him, and he'd taken off his shirt. When the door swung open, Layton pulled the blanket around him, hiding his bare chest.

"How did you get in?" he said sullenly. "I locked the door."

Kyle looked uncharacteristically serious. "I picked the lock. Seriously, it's like you don't know me."

"Yeah, okay," Layton said grumpily. "You picked the lock. Congratulations. What, you want a medal or something?" When Kyle was silent, Layton lay back down and rolled over. "Go away."

"No."

"I said go away!"

"No. Not until you talk to me," Kyle said stubbornly.

Layton heaved a sigh and sat up. "Fine," he growled. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Layton-"

"What!" Layton shot at him. "Can't you see that I'm having a hard time here?"

Kyle flicked on the light, and Layton saw that his eyes were soft with concern. "I know you are," he said. "That's what I came in

here for. I can't let you be alone, Layton. You can't wallow in it and you can't hide from it. Take it from me. I know how it feels to be afraid of who you are."

"I'm not gay," Layton said in a low voice.

Kyle sat on the edge of the bed. He seemed to take it as a good sign that Layton didn't push him away. "This doesn't mean you're gay," he pointed out.

Layton laughed derisively. "What does it mean, then?"

"There's more than two sexualities, you know. Maybe you're just bi."

Layton blinked. It was a thought that hadn't occurred to him. "I guess so," he said slowly.

"I've met guys like you before, Layton. Confused and upset *because* they're confused. You think you really need to put a label on yourself? Get rid of that label and you'll feel a million times better."

Oddly enough, Layton was already beginning to feel a little better. Kyle continued. "The heart wants what the heart wants. Can't you just be happy with that?"

Layton swallowed. "I don't know. This is just so much to take in. I mean, I lived my entire life thinking I was straight. And then I saw you again, and I just…" his eyes blurred with tears again, but he felt no shame in letting Kyle see. "I've just been so confused," he whispered finally. "But you're right, Kyle. Of course you're right. I'm attracted to you."

A soft, slow smile lit up Kyle's face. "Do you feel better now?"

"A little," Layton admitted. He cleared his throat. "Thank you. Just give me some time, okay?"

"Of course," Kyle agreed. He got up and flicked off the light. "You can think about the way you feel later. There's always time to think later."

Layton thought that it was actually good advice. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." And then Kyle was sliding into bed with him.

Layton's eyes popped open and he stiffened. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not sleeping on that damn couch. That thing's mad uncomfortable."

"Get out," Layton said through clenched teeth.

"Make me," Kyle said pleasantly in his ear. When Layton didn't answer Kyle sighed. "Look, it's just sleeping. I won't try anything."

"Do you mean it?" Layton asked, although part of him really wanted Kyle to finish what he'd started earlier.

"Yeah," Kyle said in a brittle voice. He rolled over so that their backs were touching and wrapped the covers around him.

Layton finally relaxed. He realized that it was incredibly comforting sharing a bed with Kyle. All of his doubts and fears slowly melted away, replaced by a soothing calm. Kyle was right. He could worry about his feelings in the morning. Right now there was only him and Kyle, and the other boy's even, steady breathing.

Layton was on the verge of sleep when he thought of something. "Kyle?"

"Hmm?" Kyle's sleepy voice replied.

"You never did tell me what your nightmare was about."

He felt Kyle's bare back tense, and when the blond boy spoke Layton could tell that he was wide awake now. "I dreamed that you found out about my past and told me you didn't want to be my friend anymore."

Layton's heart softened. "That's not going to happen. No matter what, we'll still be friends. Always." And it was the truth. He couldn't shut Kyle out. They'd been through too much in the past few days. You couldn't stop being friends with someone after that.

"Promise?" Kyle whispered sleepily.

"I promise."

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It was only on nights like these, when the moonlight filtered through the window uninterrupted by clouds and the sounds of society seemed increasingly distant, that Kyle allowed himself to think about how he'd ended up where he was now.

Not where he was physically, but rather where he was in terms of existence. He examined the man lying in the bed next to him, wondering not for the first time if this was a dream. Kyle had the most peaceful expression on his face when he slept—for all the worries and hardships he faced in the waking world, they didn't seem to extend into his dreams.

Kyle sighed and reached over to the other man, gently threading his fingers through Layton's golden, bleach-damaged locks before moving down to brush his fingers against his jaw. Layton scrunched his nose and Kyle quickly retracted his hand, afraid of disturbing the man's slumber. Layton shifted onto his back, and the moonlight shone brightly on his face, illuminating his features. Kyle's breath caught at the sight.

He owed this man his existence, and he would never forget it until the day he died.

The summer in which they first met was the worst kind, the kind no one dared step out into unless they had some sort of death wish. Although Kyle did have one of those at the time, even he would rather not die from heatstroke.

His parents had signed him up for a summer arts camp without his knowledge as soon as he'd graduated high school, shipping him off to another state under the pretense that they were helping him; Kyle knew they weren't doing it for him, not really. They just wanted him gone. Having him at home only served as a stain on the family name—no one wanted a gay son.

He hadn't protested when his parents told him to pack his bags and get lost(not in those exact words, of course) because there was no point in arguing. He knew he wasn't wanted there; he wasn't wanted anywhere. Even standing out in the hot sun, surrounded by other artists of varying ages, he felt alone. The camp proctor went on about something to do with rules and protocols, but Kyle didn't see a point in listening. He wasn't going to last until the end of the camp, anyway.

As the days drifted by and summer only grew more and more unbearable, Kyle had tried to keep to himself separated from the rest of the camp. It had worked, for the most part. After several campers attempts to befriend him went unanswered, they backed off and left him to his own devices. He planned for the day he could finally leave it all behind.

On the hottest day of the summer, Kyle had gathered his bag, empty save for his sketchbook, a pencil, and a long spool of industry-strength rope and ducked out of the camp, heading for the nearby woods. After several weeks of indecisiveness, he'd finally built up the resolve to go through with his plan.

His legs carried him deep into the thick until he'd settled at the base of a large oak, taking out his sketchbook to make one final note. Not that anyone would find it, but the sentiment was still there. After he'd finished, he set it on the ground and began fumbling with the rope, hands shaking.

"What are you doing?" A voice ripped through the silence, and Kyle whipped around to face a boy—a boy he recognized because he'd spent hours sneaking glances at him from his usual spot under an ancient willow tree.

He tried to reply, but his words caught in his throat. He shook his head and tried to hide the rope behind his back, staying quiet. The boy took a step towards him, eyes flicking down at the note and then back up at his face. His gaze was searching, questioning, and Kyle felt uncomfortably trapped under the weight of his scrutiny.

The boy stepped closer and Kyle stepped back, his foot catching on a root and sending him to the ground, his back slamming into the rough tree bark of the tree behind him. The expression on the boy's faced had morphed into something solemn and decisive, and Kyle flinched back and screwed his eyes instinctively, waiting for the familiar sting of a punch.

When no explosion of pain followed, Kyle slowly opened his eyes to an outstretched hand. He looked up at the boy in confusion; what was he trying to do? The boy smiled, bending down towards him a little farther. "Come on, just take my hand already. Or were you planning on sitting down there all day?"

Kyle flushed in embarrassment, looking away from the boy as he clasped his hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. After a moment of silence, he mumbled, "Thanks."

The boy shrugged his shoulders and replied, "No problem. I saw you leave the camp so I… I followed you, I guess?"

Kyle looked up sharply, questions collecting on the tip of his tongue. "Why?"

"I know about–er, I know about your situation, I guess?" Kyle tensed, unsure of what to think. How could someone else have known about him?

He gulped and rasped out quietly, "Did you come here just to mock me for it? Tell me I should go ahead and off myself because I'm so disgusting? Because if that's the case, I could've done that without your help."

The boy lifted his hands placatingly and said in a rush, "No, no, Jesus, why would I ever do that?" He sighed and bit his lip before continuing, "I noticed you never really got on with any of the rest of us at the camp and I figured it had something to do with that, but no one else really figured it out but I knew and I felt bad that you were always all alone..."

“How did you find out?”

“It doesn’t matter. The point is, whatever you were planning on doing, don’t do it. You’re not alone.”

Kyle scoffed. “I don’t exactly see people lining up to become friends with me.”

“What if I want to?”

Kyle looked up from the ground, searching the boy’s gaze for any hint of a lie. He found none. He stared at him dumbly, barely breathing.

The boy cleared his throat awkwardly, and Kyle began to shift nervously from foot to foot.

“My name’s Layton, and I promise to never leave you alone again,” said Layton firmly, grasping Kyle’s hand in a strong handshake. When he let go, Kyle let his arm drop limply to his side, gaping at the unbelievable person in front of him. He wasn’t used to such straightforwardness.

Letting out an exasperated snort, the boy stooped down to pick up Kyle’s bag and slung it over his shoulder. Then he turned back to Kyle, and with a serious look, he said, “You’re not alone anymore, okay?”

For the third time, Layton held out his hand, and after only a moment’s hesitation, Kyle took it. “Okay.”

That was the day Kyle’s life began.

Now, lying next to Layton, happy and most of all—wanted—was still surreal to him sometimes. Layton didn’t want him gone, but the memories of how they had met and all they’d struggled through to get to where they were now still resurfaced on occasion, turning his peaceful nights into those of melancholy reminiscence.

Scooting closer to the other man’s warm body, Kyle wrapped his arm around Layton’s slim waist, burying his nose in the back of his neck. The other groaned and mumbled sleepily, turning to face Kyle before opening his eyes, blinking slowly. Voice deep and

slightly hoarse from just waking up, Layton murmured, “Is something wrong?”

Kyle smiled and pressed closer to the other. “No,” he replied, feeling all of his worries slip away at the sound of Layton’s voice. “No, everything is great. Perfect, in fact.”

Chapter 8

When he woke up the next morning, Layton sat up and stretched, feeling good. Damn good, in fact. It had been the best night's sleep he'd had in a long time.

He rubbed the last traces of sleep from his eyes and looked around. Kyle was nowhere to be seen.

His eyes widened; now that he was fully awake, he could smell smoke emanating from the kitchen.

Alarmed, he swung his legs out of bed and rushed towards the kitchen. He stopped in his tracks, unsure if he should laugh or not.

Kyle was standing in front of the stove. Stuck to the pan were the burned, blackened remains of something that Layton couldn't identify.

Kyle glanced up, and the genuinely apologetic expression on his face finally sent Layton over the edge; he slapped his hand over his mouth, but he was unable to stop guffawing. Kyle glared at him, but after a moment he started laughing, too.

"I tried to cook you breakfast," Kyle said when their laughter finally tapered off. "I should have known better."

"You should've," Layton agreed amiably. He couldn't stop grinning.

Kyle dumped the charred eggs into the trash can. "Fuck this shit. Let's get some cereal."

As Layton poured milk into his overflowing bowl of Lucky Charms, Kyle approached him from behind and slipped his arms around his waist. Layton stopped what he was doing and stood stock-still, his heart pounding. "I slept really good last night," Kyle said.

"Me too," Layton said quietly.

"Thank you for not kicking me out of bed."

"Thank you for making me feel better," Layton countered.

Kyle's arms disappeared, and Layton found himself wishing that he hadn't. "Come on, the news is on," Kyle said.

They settled on the couch and turned on the T.V. Layton was immediately greeted by a picture of his own face.

The female reporter was talking. "The search for the missing son of the governor has taken an unexpected twist," she said. "Police received a tip last night that Layton Law was spotted in downtown Masonville early yesterday morning."

Kyle grew pale. Layton's eyes widened and his spoon fell from his numb fingers and bounced across the carpet. He ignored it and stared at the television, his heart thumping unpleasantly in his chest.

The reporter continued. "He was seen in a red 2002 Ford

F-150, in the company of this man, who police have yet to identify." A police sketch of Kyle popped up in the left-hand corner of the screen. "The tipper assured us that Layton appeared unharmed, but investigators arrived in Masonville, which is over a hundred miles from where Layton was seen last, early this morning and intend to renew the search there."

The woman ended her report with her usual reminder to call the hotline if Layton was seen and then moved on. Layton's hand shook as he grabbed the remote and turned the television off.

"They're onto us," he said in a low voice.

"Yeah," Kyle said, and for once in his life he seemed to be out of jokes.

"How did they know?"

"Someone must have recognized you when we were in town yesterday," Kyle said, and there was a trace of anger in his voice. "I told you not to come."

"I know," Layton said in a tiny voice. "I'm sorry."

"If you want this to work, you're going to have to trust me," Kyle said.

"I do."

"Then listen to me when I say that something's dangerous," Kyle said peevishly. "I mean, not that it'd be any skin off your back if we did get caught."

Layton's stomach lurched. "What do you mean?"

Kyle laughed unkindly. "You're the son of the fucking governor," he said. "Why do you keep forgetting that? You were born with a silver spoon. Your daddy will bail you out of jail in a heartbeat if only to keep his reputation intact. Me, I'm screwed. I'm the one in danger here, not you."

"Quit throwing that in my face," Layton snarled. "I can't help the family that I was born into any more than you can help the fact that your mother's a junkie and your dad's a deadbeat. So stop making me feel guilty."

The anger finally faded out of Kyle's face, and he looked sheepish. "You're right. I was being an ass. I'm just strung-out, that's all."

"Me, too," Layton said.

They were silent for a moment, but it wasn't an awkward silence. Layton got another spoon and finished eating his cereal while Kyle lit up a cigarette, filling the cozy room with a hazy cloud of grayish-silver smoke that whirled and danced in the air.

Finally Layton spoke. "Are we going to talk about last night at all?"

"What do you want to talk about?" Kyle asked. His voice was

casual, but his eyes were sharp and alert as he leaned forward and tapped ashes into the glass ashtray on the coffee table.

"I don't know," Layton admitted. "I just feel like there's something we need to talk about."

"Well then, shoot," Kyle said with a shrug. "But I think we covered it all last night."

Layton watched the twirling smoke. "I was just thinking about my dad."

"What about him?"

"Just how he would react if he found out. About us, I mean. The way I feel and what I did."

"How would he react?" Kyle asked curiously.

Layton thought for a moment. Henry Law wasn't openly anti-gay, but he'd had fought the legalization of same-sex marriage. When the ruling came in, Layton heard his father let out a stream of expletives. Whenever he saw a gay couple together on television, he'd always express his disgust. "He'd be ashamed of me," he said finally. "It definitely wouldn't help my relationship with him. But…" and then he stopped, unsure of what to say next.

"What?" Kyle urged him.

"I don't know," Layton said slowly. "It just doesn't seem as important to me as it did before. Getting his approval. I mean, I spent my whole life trying to make him happy, making my life choices based on what I thought he'd want me to do. I didn't want to play football and I didn't want to go to the university."

"What did you want?" Kyle asked gently.

"I don't know, but not that."

They sat in silence again for a moment, just enjoying each other's company. This time it was Kyle who broke the silence. "Only two more days and then you get to go home."

Layton swallowed. A lump rose in his throat. "Yeah."

"Hopefully it'll go off without a hitch."

"I hope so," Layton said.

But he still couldn't shake the nasty suspicion that it was going to end in disaster.

Chapter 9

That day and the next passed with no incident. Layton and Kyle continued to talk and share each other's company, and at night, they slept in the bed together. On the second night they cuddled, Kyle spooning a sleepy Layton while a gentle summer rain drummed on the roof. But nothing else sexual had happened since the impromptu oral play on the front porch. Kyle was afraid to press his luck and drive Layton away from him.

He sat on the couch on the morning of their last day together, smoking a cigarette and staring at the ceiling. He'd been unable to sleep the night before. Partly because his nervousness was mounting now that the day of the tradeoff had finally arrived, partly because all he'd wanted to do was hold Layton and listen to the dark-haired boy's soft, deep breathing and feel his strong, steady heartbeat.

He knew Layton was physically attracted to him, but it was different for Kyle. He was quickly falling head-over-heels in love with Layton.

He'd been in love once before, when he was seventeen, with a fellow homeless teenager who'd been kicked out of his house for the same reason. But it'd taken him months to realize his feelings then. With Layton, however, his love had developed within days. Never had it been this strong; just the thought of parting from Layton sent a stab of sorrow through his chest.

He inhaled deeply on his cigarette and crushed it out in the ashtray. He had no clue what was going to happen after today, but one thing was certain; he couldn't live without Layton in his life, either as his friend or as his lover. Either way, he swore to himself that they weren't going to just go their separate ways. He couldn't just forget about Layton.

"Are you ready, man?"

"I guess so," Layton said slowly.

They stood in front of Kyle's truck. It was nearly dark, and it was time to get going.

In Kyle's ransom letter, he'd stated that the quarter of a million in cash should be waiting for him in a briefcase beside the statue of the Civil War soldier in the city park three blocks from Layton's house. He'd warned that there would be consequences if there was anyone waiting for him. He'd release Layton, who'd then walk to his house, and Kyle would take off.

The more he thought about it, the sketchier the plan seemed. Would they really just let him drive away with that much cash? Would they really let him get away with kidnapping the governor's

son?

He didn't know, and he tried not to think about it. Instead, they climbed into the truck and cranked up the engine.

Layton was silent and thoughtful. His heart ached with sadness. He didn't want to go home, not really. And he was worried, terribly worried. But he didn't' want to mention his fears to Kyle.

"So what are we?" Kyle finally said.

Layton jumped, startled. "What?" he said. He'd heard Kyle perfectly, but he wanted to buy some time before he had to answer.

"What are we?" Kyle repeated. There was a look of determination on his face. "I got to know, man."

Layton hesitated. "I don't know," he answered truthfully.

He'd expected Kyle to get upset, but he just sighed instead. "I guess I knew that. I'm sorry."

"Are you asking me to make a decision?" Layton said quietly.

"I'm not going to ask you anything. It'd be nice, yes, but I'm not going to put that kind of pressure on you."

"Thank you," Layton said softly. "I'm not going to leave you hanging or string you along. Just give me some time to work everything out. That's all I ask."

"I can do that," Kyle said just as quietly. "But before we go through with this, there's something you gotta know."

"What is it?" Layton asked. He noted how Kyle's normally steady hands shook, and it was a minute before Kyle finally answered.

"I love you."

Layton's heart constricted and his eyes widened. His stomach was all done up in knots.

"You don't have to say it too," Kyle said. His eyes were glued on the road ahead of him, refusing to look at Layton. "I'm not going to make you do that and I'm not going to get upset. I just wanted you to know. Just in case something goes wrong."

"Nothing's going to go wrong," Layton said with no great conviction.

"Maybe, maybe not. But I had to say it," Kyle said.

Layton bit his lip. What should he say? Did he love Kyle? He didn't know, but he did know that the thought of never seeing Kyle again was a thought that filled him with stark terror. Was that love?

"I care about you," Layton said slowly. "I do. But I don't know how I feel."

"I know, Layton," Kyle said gently. "I'll wait for you to figure it out."

Layton smiled, touched. "Thank you. I—"

"Oh, fuck!" Kyle cried, cutting Layton's sentence off. Layton, who'd been watching Kyle, faced forward again and his heart leaped

in his chest.

The road was blocked by five police cars, a K-9 unit van, a SWAT van, and a news van. Red and blue flashing lights dominated the scene, filling the mountain forest around them with sharp, contrasting shadows. Unable to go any further, Kyle slammed on the brakes and they faced the vehicles helplessly. A low moan issued from Layton's throat as fear pulsed through his bodies.

No fewer than eleven cops faced them, pointing their service pistols directly at Kyle's chest. From above, Layton could hear the steady, choppy drone of a helicopter.

"Release the hostage!" a deep male voice over a megaphone shouted. "Step out of the vehicle with your hands above your head!"

Chapter 10

"We have to go!" Layton cried.

"They got guns pointed at us!"

"They won't shoot! They never shoot in hostage situations. They're too afraid of hitting me," Layton said. He wasn't sure if it was true or not, but they couldn't get caught. He realized that his concern wasn't for him, but for Kyle.

Kyle didn't answer. He looked frightened and uncertain.

"Turn the truck around!"

Kyle opened his mouth to respond, and then closed it again. All the color drained from his face, and a look of stark terror, just a step away from panic, filled his eyes. Layton looked forward and saw the source of Kyle's fear right away.

Three dogs, huge K-9 German shepherds complete with bulletproof vests protecting their barrel-like chests, strained at the leashes held by their partners in between the waiting cops. Their deep, braying barks, filled with hatred and malice, boomed around them.

Layton saw the look on Kyle's face and knew that the dogs scared him more than the guns.

He shook Kyle's shoulder. "Kyle!"

He didn't respond. His eyes were wide, empty emeralds.

"Kyle! We have to get out of here!"

Kyle trembled as the largest dog reared up on its hind legs, barely restrained as it snarled and snapped.

"Kyle!"

He finally seemed to hear him, but it was too late. The cab of the truck was filled with flashing blue lights as two more police cars pulled up behind them.

They were trapped.

"Release the hostage!" the voice shouted again over the megaphone.

Layton and Kyle looked at each other miserably.

"Release the hostage or we're releasing the dogs!" The canines barked even louder in response, eager to taste blood and tear flesh.

Layton grabbed Kyle's hand. It felt like wood in his grip. Kyle was shaking. "Get out of the car, Layton."

"I'm not leaving you! We'll go together and explain to them."

"I said get out of the car," Kyle said in an unsteady voice.

Layton hesitated, then squeezed the other boy's hand in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture and swung open the door.

He stepped out onto the pavement and walked slowly towards the flashing lights and the crowd of people, who waited anxiously as

he approached. As soon as he was close to them, one of the police officers seized his arm and pulled him out of harm's way.

"Are you hurt, son?"

"I'm fine," Layton said automatically. Fear pounded in his chest. "But Kyle-"

Before he could speak, three of the uniformed men rushed forward and yanked Kyle out of the truck, bending him over the hood and slapping cuffs around his wrists. Layton yelled out in alarm and started to run towards him, but the cop was still holding him by the arm.

"It's fine. They've got him, and you're safe now," the man said in a soothing voice.

Layton struggled against the big man's grip, his eyes wide and terrified as he watched his friend. "No. No, it was all my idea," he said in a low voice. But nobody heard him over the excitement. His mouth was dry and his heart was racing.

"Layton!" a familiar voice, shaking a little, called out. Layton whirled around and saw his father running towards him.

Henry looked awful. He was unshaven and dark purple bruises bloomed under both his eyes, evidence that he'd been sleeping badly. His shirt was untucked and it flapped around him like a sail as he rushed towards his son.

"Layton. Thank God. Thank God you're okay," Henry said as he pulled Layton into a crushing embrace. Layton's eyes widened. It was the first time his father had hugged him since his mother's funeral years ago. "I was so damn worried."

His plan had worked, then, but Layton felt far from happy. He was terrified. He pulled away from his father. "You have to stop them, Dad," he said urgently. His eyes flickered behind him, where they were now loading Kyle into the back of a black-and-white cruiser.

Henry's eyebrows bunched together. "Why?" he said anxiously.

"It was all my fault," Layton said miserably. "I planned it. I staged the whole thing and Kyle helped me."

Henry's face darkened. He seized his son's arm. "Over here. Let's talk over here so we won't be overheard."

He led Layton away from the crowd. Layton's fear grew with each step. They were finally a good distance away, and the people left them alone, presumably respectfully giving Henry time alone with his son.

Henry whirled on him, his hands on his hips. Layton had never seen his father like this. The relief was gone, replaced with a swirling black anger.

"You faked the whole fucking thing!?"

"Yes, Dad," Layton said meekly.

Henry ran his hands through his hair. He looked beside himself with rage. “Do you have any idea the hell I’ve been going through?” he hissed. “You-you stand there and you tell me that this was all your idea?” He breathed heavily through his nose, like a large animal that has run an incredible distance.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Layton said quietly. He felt terrible.

“Why? Why did you do it?”

Layton was still scared of his father, but this time his anger overpowered his fear. “Because you were treating me like shit,” he growled. “You wouldn’t even look at me half the time. It’s like you didn’t care about me at all.”

Henry looked as if he’d been slapped. Layton continued. “I was miserable at that house, Dad. Miserable with my life. I had to know that you cared about me enough to even try to find me.”

“You spoiled brat,” Henry said in soft wonder.

“Maybe, but look me in the eyes and tell me that you were treating me like a son,” Layton challenged.

Henry finally dropped his eyes. “It’s a thought that haunted me for a week now,” he said in a hoarse voice. “Not knowing if I would ever see you again—I couldn’t sleep at night. All I could think about was how I treated you. I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

Layton’s throat constricted. Hearing those words was all he wanted all along.

“I have to go tell them,” Layton said. “I’ll tell them that I set the whole thing up and they can let Kyle go.”

Henry’s eyes narrowed. “Absolutely not.”

Layton’s heart fluttered. “Why not?”

“You’ll be charged with fraud,” Henry said shortly.

“So be it,” Layton said evenly. “But I can’t let Kyle pay for my mistakes.”

“I can’t afford another scandal,” Henry said in a dangerous voice.

“It’s wrong, Dad!” cried Layton. “I can’t…I can’t—“

“You can and you will,” Henry said firmly. “We’ll keep this between us, you have my word, but I forbid you from telling anyone else.”

“And what if I do?” Layton said through gritted teeth.

A shadow settled over his father’s voice. “Then I’ll have no choice but to disown you,” he threatened. “If I don’t, to the public it’ll look as if I approve of your actions. I can’t allow that. You’ll lose the trust fund and your car, and I’ll never speak to you again. You’ll no longer be my son.”

Layton’s jaw dropped. Disowned? He didn’t care about the money or the car, but his father was making him choose between

him…or Kyle.

"You *will* testify against him," Henry said sternly. "You stick to the original kidnapping story and you put that fucker away. I don't care if it was your idea, but he knew it was wrong and he went along with it anyway. He deserves to go to prison."

"No, he doesn't," Layton whispered through numb lips.

Henry gripped his arm tight enough to hurt. "He's going to wind up there either way," he said firmly. "It's up to you whether or not you join him. If you do, you can rot there." He released his son's arm and strode away, leaving Layton to stare after him with wide, scared eyes.

Chapter 11

"I'm not testifying," Layton said for the fourth time that morning as he stubbornly tossed aside the tie his father had passed him.

Henry's face tightened. "Yes, you are."

"I can't."

"You can and you will," Henry snarled. He threw the tie back at Layton. "Now hurry up and get dressed. We have to be at the courthouse in an hour." With that he stomped out.

Slowly and miserably, Layton put the tie on. He looked at himself in the mirror and was disgusted by what he saw. Just another rich boy with a silver spoon in his mouth, ready to fuck over the less fortunate to assure his own position.

It had been a month since Kyle had been arrested for kidnapping, conspiracy, and grand theft auto. Layton hadn't seen or spoken to him since that night, and he was sick at heart, longing for the other boy.

He loved Kyle. He knew it now. He had the love and attention of his father again—Henry had made a huge effort to improve his relationship with his son, and Layton was touched—but it wasn't enough. He wanted Kyle, needed Kyle. His dreams were haunted by the blond boy's handsome face, by the time they'd spent together in the cozy little cabin nestled in the mountains. Layton dwelled on their time together often, and his memories of the place had gained a magical quality that made him ache with longing.

He'd lost ten pounds because he'd been refusing meals. He never felt hungry, and he hurt all the time.

A pang of unhappiness pierced his heart when he pictured the look of betrayal on Kyle's face when Layton testified against him. But what choice did he have? He could lose Kyle or he could lose his father.

He wasn't sure which one would hurt the most.

His face pale and still, Layton shut his bedroom door and joined his father downstairs.

"Please raise your right hand."

Layton did as he was asked. He could feel all eyes upon him, including Kyle's. Layton trembled at the intensity behind those bright green eyes. His heart had leaped in his throat when he saw Kyle sitting there behind the table, clad in an orange jumpsuit with his hands and ankles cuffed. His heart could hardly bear the sight.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I swear," Layton said in a strong voice that trembled only slightly.

The judge nodded at him as the lawyer that Henry had hired approached the stand. The odds were stacked incredibly against Kyle; Henry had shelled out an enormous amount of money to hire one of the best lawyers in the country, while Kyle was stuck with a court-appointed hack who looked at least eight years old, with watery eyes swimming behind thick spectacles. He looked like an old, confused, overweight mole.

"Please state your name," Henry's lawyer, a man named George Nolan, said promptly. It was completely unnecessary, as everyone in that courtroom knew exactly who he was, but Layton complied anyway.

"Layton Law."

"And how do you know Mr. McCreery?" Nolan asked with a nod towards Kyle.

Layton swallowed and tried to speak, but his throat was incredibly dry. He tried again. "We met at summer camp five years ago. We were friends. Really good friends." He tried not to look at Kyle, but it was hard.

"Uh huh," Nolan said. "Could you please tell the court what happened on the evening of June 5th?"

Layton took a deep breath. He stole another glance at Kyle. The blond boy's face was impassive, but Layton thought he detected a trace of softness in his remarkable eyes.

He shifted his attention back towards the lawyer. "I rode up to Bollinger's Peak to meet my then-girlfriend, Amanda." He could see Amanda sitting in the crowd. She was watching him reproachfully. He'd broken up with her about a week after Kyle had been arrested, and she hadn't forgiven him for it yet.

"And then what happened?" Nolan inquired.

Layton took a deep breath. "I parked my car to wait for her—"

"Around what time?"

"Eight o'clock."

Nolan nodded. "Please continue."

Layton's eyes drifted towards Kyle again. The other boy didn't look betrayed or upset; on the contrary, he looked resigned.

"I saw headlights, and Kyle pulled up in that red truck."

"The stolen truck?"

"That's correct."

"What happened next?"

"He—he got out of the truck."

"And?"

Layton opened his mouth, but he couldn't speak. He locked

eyes with Kyle. There was a faint trace of sadness in the other boy's eyes. *Do what you must,* that expression said.

Layton tried to speak again. The crowd was watching him expectedly, and Henry gazed at his son with sharp eyes.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't lie about what had happened, and he couldn't throw Kyle under the bus. He'd deal with the consequences of his actions, but he couldn't make Kyle pay for them. Once he accepted that, peace washed over them. He was still scared, but now he was determined as well.

"I'm sorry, I can't do this anymore."

A murmur ran through the crowd. Henry threw a warning look at Layton, and Kyle sat up straighter in his seat. He shook his head, but Layton ignored him.

"I set the whole thing up. It was my idea."

Gasps and whispers ran through the people seated in front of him. The judge banged his gavel down, and when the crowd was silent he addressed Layton. "Is this true?"

"I swear on my life."

The judge raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"I was trying to get back at my father for the way he was treating me," Layton said. Henry glared at his son.

Kyle was shaking his head. "No, Layton. Shut up!" he hissed.

The judge turned his attention to Kyle. "What do you have to say, Mr. McCreery. Is he telling the truth?"

"He's lying. It was my idea."

"No, it wasn't!" Layton shot at him angrily. "Quit trying to cover my ass and just tell the truth."

Kyle's intense, burning eyes finally lost their angry quality, and he only looked tired. "Fine," he said in a low voice.

The judge leaned forward. "What did you say?" he asked sharply.

Kyle looked up. He looked miserable. "He's telling the truth. I helped him, but it was his idea."

The crowd was temporarily struck dumb. The judge crossed his arms as he addressed Kyle. "Why would you take the fall for him?"

"I can answer that," Layton said softly. As one, the crowd turned their attention to him. He could feel all their eyes on him, his father's, Amanda's, everyone's. He felt a little queasy, but he no longer felt ashamed.

He would never be ashamed about the way he felt about Kyle. It'd taken being away from him for him to realize that.

"Kyle and I are more than friends. We're lovers."

It was so quiet in the courtroom that you could hear a pin drop. The crowd seemed to be holding their breath. Kyle looked

dazzled and amazed, but Layton's eyes sought out his father's. Henry looked shocked and horrified, but when Layton shifted his attention back to Kyle's handsome, happy face, he thought he could live with that.

"I see," the judge said curtly. "That would certainly explain a lot."

"It was a stupid thing for me to do, involving Kyle in this," Layton said. He was talking only to the judge now, pleading with him. "It wasn't his fault. He was only trying to help me. Please, do whatever you have to me, but don't make him pay for my bad judgment."

The judge looked thoughtful. "Is there anything you want to add to this, Mr. McCreery?"

Kyle shook his head. "Only that I love him, and that I hope both you and his father realize that both Layton and I never meant any harm to anybody."

"That doesn't change the fact that both of you broke the law," the judge said. He turned towards Layton. "You, young man, don't seem to have the slightest idea just how big of a fuss you caused. You had half the state looking for you. Almost a million dollars in resources were spend trying to find you, and it was all some half-brained plan to get to your father? You should be ashamed of yourself."

"I am," Layton said softly, "but I'm trying to make up for that by not letting an innocent man take the blame for my mistakes."

The judge seemed a little taken aback at that. "That may be, but it doesn't change the law." He turned back towards Kyle. "Mr. McCreery, it seems like today is your lucky day. Mr. Carson, who just so happens to own the truck you stole, is willing to drop the theft charges if you'll agree to work on his farm for two months to make up for the money he had to pay to get a new truck. Is that agreeable to you?"

Kyle looked shocked, but he nodded. "Yes, that's fair."

"And without the kidnapping charges, once I make my verdict, that makes you a free man."

Kyle looked beside himself with glee. But then the judge addressed Layton. "You, on the other hand, are not so lucky. I hereby charge you with conspiracy and fraud, sentence to be decided by court hearing." He pounded the gavel and the crowd began to babble excitedly, as if that had been the signal they'd been waiting for.

Layton was numb and still, but he accepted his punishment. Kyle, on the other hand, looked stricken as the bailiff approached Layton with a set of cuffs.

"No…no, Layton!"

Layton locked eyes with Kyle as the bailiff cuffed his hands. “I love you,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry I didn’t say it before.”

“I love you, too,” Kyle called after him as he was led away. Layton’s eyes stung with tears, but they were tears of relief as well as sorrow. Whatever may happen to him, he’d finally done the right thing.

He sat in his jail cell with his back pressed against the cold concrete wall. He was alone and scared, but he felt at peace with himself.

He remembered his father’s expression of betrayal and disgust, but it didn’t sting as much as he thought it would. Either his father would forgive him or he wouldn’t. Either way, it was beyond his control and there was nothing he could do about it.

He stared at the wall, lost in his own thoughts, when a metallic rattling startled him. Layton whipped his head up to see a uniformed guard standing in front of him. He’d slid the barred door open.

“Time to go, Law.”

“Huh?” Layton’s mouth dropped open.

“You’ve been bailed out,” the guard said impatiently. “Come on, hurry up. Look lively.”

Layton scrambled to his feet and exited the cell. Surely not…

Henry Law stood in front of the desk near the front of the building. He was tucking his wallet back into his pants. He spied Layton and offered a tiny, strained smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Come on, son.” He turned around and left without waiting to see if Layton followed him. Becoming more and more mystified by the moment, Layton trailed behind his father.

As soon as they exited the police station, Henry made his way to a bench near the sidewalk and sat down. Unsure, but not knowing what else to do, Layton sat down beside him.

Henry reached into his shirt pocket and fumbled out a pack of cigarettes. Layton stared; he’d never seen his father smoke in his life.

Henry lit a cigarette and chuffed out smoke. He closed his eyes blissfully. “I haven’t had a cigarette since the day your mother died,” he said.

Layton was very still. His father had never talked about his mother’s death after she’d been buried.

“What do you want me to say?” Henry said suddenly. He inhaled deeply on the cigarette. “You want me to say that you’re no longer my son? I thought I would, but I can’t do that. I can’t lose you again. You want me to say that I understand what you did? I do, to a point. You want me to say I approve of you being gay? I don’t.”

Layton’s heart dropped to his feet, but Henry held up his hand and continued. “But that’s the great thing about it, Layton. I don’t

have to approve. But you're my son, and I love you." The words were finally out, and Layton was stunned. "I want you to do whatever makes you happy. I never meant to put any pressure on you. And I never meant to shut you out. That was just my way of coping, I guess. But it was wrong." The cigarette shook in his hand, sending uneven tendrils of smoke rising into the sweet summer air. "It was wrong of me to take it out on you. It's not your fault we lost your mother, and I'm sorry."

"Thanks, Dad," Layton said quietly. "You have no clue how much that means to me."

"I guess I do," Henry said in a voice rough with emotion. "I thought I'd lost you forever. Now how could I lose you again by shunning you now? I don't approve, but you have my blessing. If being with this boy makes you happy, then by God, you do it and don't let me or anyone else tell you otherwise."

Layton could hardly believe what he was hearing.

Henry suddenly crushed his cigarette underneath his shiny dress shoes and pulled Layton into a hug. Layton closed his eyes.

They pulled apart, and Henry beamed at him. "Kyle's waiting for you on the courthouse steps," he said. "If I were you, I wouldn't keep him waiting."

Layton didn't need to be told twice.

Epilogue

He gripped Kyle's hand tighter as the Jag, neatly fixed and looking none the worse for wear, turned down the narrow dirt path. Layton grinned at him, his own excitement apparent.

The cabin came into sight, just as cozy and perfect as Layton's heart remembered. He could hardly contain himself, and he was jumping out of the Jaguar as soon as it'd coasted to a stop.

"Hey, don't forget your stuff!" Kyle called out as he held up a large black duffel bag, which Kyle had stuffed with clothes in anticipation of the week he was going to spend with his boyfriend.

"You bring it," Layton said with a grin. "You're the brawn, remember?"

"Yeah," Kyle said cheerfully as he swung the strap of the bag across his hard, muscular shoulder. Layton's heart began to race as his eyes crawled over Kyle's young, muscular body.

He couldn't wait for Kyle to get inside so that he could explore it in full. He imagined dragging his tongue across Kyle's tanned, chiseled chest, thought about the way the blond boy would gasp in delight as Layton kissed his stomach right above the waistband of his boxers. His breath caught in anticipation.

Kyle stepped onto the porch and gave Layton a sexy, smoldering half-smile. "Watcha thinking about?"

"How fucking sexy you are," Layton said in a low voice.

"Yeah?" Kyle said huskily. His eyes glinted as he tossed the duffel bag on the porch.

"Hey, be careful with that! Those clothes are expensive."

"Fuck your clothes," Kyle said, and he pinned Layton against the closed door of the cabin and hungrily kissed him.

Fire raced through Layton's body, and he gave himself up to his desire completely this time. He wrapped his arms around Kyle's muscular body, pulling him in closer. He could feel his iron-hard erection pressing against his stomach, and he longed for more.

Kyle's warm lips nuzzled Layton's throat, and his pulse raced as Kyle trailed kisses along his jawline and collarbone.

Kyle's lips settled on his again, and Layton moaned against his mouth as Kyle's tongue slipped inside, caressing and teasing and tasting. His fingers entwined in Kyle's thick, soft hair, Layton kissed him back passionately.

Layton leaned his face against Kyle's bare shoulder, gasping as Kyle's fingers stroked and teased the tip of his hard, throbbing cock through his pants.

Kyle was nearly out of his mind with wild desire. He'd been

with plenty of guys, but none of them had ever been like this. Layton trembled and shook in his arms with the intensity of his lust, and Layton could never understand just how much it drove him wild. He stoked Layton's cock more firmly, and Layton let out a throaty, lusty moan as Kyle slipped his hand down the waistband of his pants and gripped his thick, throbbing shaft.

He bumped his hips, forcing Kyle's hands to slide back and forth across it. Kyle pulled his hand away, and he silenced Layton's protests with a kiss. "Into the bedroom," he breathed. His lips brushed against Layton's again, slowly and teasingly this time. "Don't worry," he whispered. "I'll go nice and slow when I fuck you the first time."

The first time, Layton thought wildly. His mind whirled with images; Kyle licking and nibbling and sucking and fucking him for hours on end. Oh, how intoxicating that sounded.

Kyle kissed Layton slowly and thoroughly first, however, and Layton felt his love, pure and unashamed, wash through him. Had he ever truly been in love before? Layton didn't think so.

"I love you," Layton breathed.

"I love you too," Kyle whispered back as he held Layton in his arms.

They went inside together, and before all thoughts were erased from his mind with the force of his pleasure, Layton had time to think that he'd never been happier in his entire life.

THE END

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He lives in a small southern town with a variety of small dogs with large appetites.
While he's just getting used to the whole "author" tag, he does love interacting with fans and readers.

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Winter's Heat

(Omega Boys #1)

By Ruby Nox

Chapter 1

Simon

I know immediately when the heat starts up. One minute, I'm sitting in the living room reading a book about the history of espers, enjoying the rare calm of the house. Then my cock starts to twitch slightly. It *has* been a while. I figure I'll deal with it in the shower later.

But then a flush starts to creep up my neck and within moments I'm sweating slightly. The house is warm, even for September. I reluctantly put my book down and stand up to go open a window. That was a mistake.

Immediately I feel the moisture seeping out of my hole and my own scent hits me like a tidal wave. Shit. Shit shit shit.

I don't usually start my heat until late spring. Not in the middle of winter. Never in winter.

Quickly, I run to the kitchen for a bottle of air freshener and give the living room a quick spray. Shoving the bottle back into the cupboard, I grab a loaf of bread, a bunch of bananas, and a box of crackers before scurrying up to my bedroom and locking the door. My alpha mother Clarice will be home from work soon and the thought makes my heart pound. Hopefully I hid the scent well enough.

She hates my heat. Says it's a disgusting trait and alphas who fall for it are redneck pigfuckers.

I'm smart enough not to mention that that's how I came into the world.

Collapsing on my bed, I groan and will for this to be a bad dream. Usually I take my wolf form and retreat into the wild. I can survive comfortably on small game until it passes and head home with no problems.

The winter doesn't allow that. Despite my fur, my wolf is embarrassingly scrawny, even for an omega. I hate it to be honest. There's not enough small game in the winter to survive on, and I can barely take on a male deer let alone a bear or moose. I'd starve within days or get killed by a pack of wild wolves.

I bury my face in my pillow and try to ignore my hardening

cock.

The front door slams, signaling Mom's return. There's pure and utter silence for a second, then I clench my eyes shut and curl up into a ball at the sound of feet coming up the stairs. She knows. Of course she knows. Mom's sense of smell is too good for a little air freshener.

Her fist raps against the door, making me flinch.

"Anything you want to tell me?" she says, voice sharp.

"Sorry," I call softly. "I don't know why-"

"You couldn't possibly wait until spring?" I can practically see her scowling.

"Are you so miserable here that you decided I need to suffer too?"

There's no use responding. She won't care about what I have to say. I don't relax until I hear her retreat. I doubt she'll be willing to get me groceries now, and I'm already low on soap and shampoo.

My cock is almost fully erect. I get up slowly, as if Mom will come running back up if I so much as move. Thanking God for my private bathroom, I turn the shower on lukewarm. I'm going to be spending a lot of time here.

My fingers wrap around my small cock, pumping quickly. There's the familiar warm buildup and my cock grows hot and throbbing. Within seconds, my small stream of cum splashes against the tile wall.

I run out of food within two days. Bread and crackers are not sustaining. The bananas help somewhat but crackers and bread leave my stomach empty again with a couple hours. My stomach growls as I wait for Mom's car to leave the driveway.

As quickly as I can, I dart downstairs to the kitchen and rummage through the cupboards for canned food. It's been two days. I just need to get through a few more and I won't have to worry about this for another year.

There isn't much. Peas, peaches, and several cans of ravioli are all I can find. Shoving them in the bag, I open the fridge. There's a container of chicken strips. I bite my lower lip. Mom will be furious, but my stomachs in knots.

Shoving the container in the top of the bag, I turn to go back upstairs and come face to face with my mother's cold gray eyes. Her face is calm, but I can see the rage just below the surface. I swallow the lump in my throat and try to take a step back. My heart pounds in my chest when I notice she's not alone.

Behind her, and looking lustfully at me, is an alpha with arms as thick as tree trunks. Bear shifter maybe? A large wolf? Or maybe he's just an exceptionally large human. He takes a step toward me and

I shrink back at his flaring nostrils and predatory gaze. Mom grabs me roughly, snapping my attention back to her.

The alpha woman's grip is like iron around my wrist, yanking me close to her until our noses are almost touching. "What are you doing down here?" she hisses.

"I just needed food," I mumble, my long bangs hiding my eyes.

She scoffs. "Get back upstairs. I'll deal with you later."

As soon as she lets go, I'm stumbling back to my room, bag of food still clutched in my hand. I half expect to hear the alpha she's with come after me as I slam the door and twist the lock. Breathing heavily, I drop the bag and slide down to the floor, back against my bed.

The terror doesn't fade as I try to ignore the moaning and howling that goes on downstairs. Great. Mom brought a date home, and my presence alone probably ruined it. I grab the carton of chicken strips and shove them into my mouth. I bite back a sob of shame and fear.

My heart pounds against my chest when I hear Mom snapping at the alpha to leave. He was exposed to my heat, which probably meant that all he could think about was the little omega up the stairs, ripe for the taking.

I can't stay here now.

I slip into the bathroom, flinching as Mom starts pounding on my door. Quickly, I reach into the cupboard below the sink and pull out the bottle of cologne. It's just strong enough to mask my scent

The door to my room bangs open, making me jump. Shakily, I reach into the cardboard box in the cupboard until my hands curl around the thick rubber plug. I yank my pants down, exposing my weeping hole, and jam it up there, hissing at the intensity. I yank my jeans back up. I hate the plug. I hate it with a passion. Dad was the one who gave it to me. He said that if I ever need to leave the house during my heat I need to wear it. It'll help weaken the scent I give off.

The scent of heat is a siren call to any unbonded alpha.

"I know you're in there," Mom says, voice like ice. "Unlock the door and we'll have a little chat."

Balancing on the edge of the tub, I open the tiny bathroom window. For once I'm thankful for my tiny boyish frame as I wriggle out. Mom's fist cracks against the door and I try to move faster.

Finally, I manage to hang onto the frame as my legs come free and I'm hanging down the side of the house. Taking a deep breath, I try to relax and let go just as I hear Mom take the door down. My knees flare up in pain as I hit the ground hard. My feet give out and I roll to my side. I shiver in my thin shirt, kicking myself for forgetting my jacket.

Ignoring the pain, I pull myself up and throw myself into a sprint toward the sidewalk. I don't stop running, as though the second I do, some alpha's going to jump my bones, which they probably would.

I reach Mag's in record time, slipping into the warm building with a sigh of relief. Mag grins when she sees me take a seat at the bar.

"Hey honey. How you doing?"

"Good," I lie. "How's the night going?"

"Slow, peaceful. But it's still early."

The solid plug in my ass pushes against me as I sit on the bar stool. This bar is seedy, but omega friendly. Mag herself is an alpha, but she's one of the nice ones. Mated with a very nice omega named Jim. She hands me a glass of rum and coke. Her eyes narrow as she sniffs the air before she gives me a concerned look.

"Bit risky for you to be out here at this time," she says sympathetically.

"I had to get out of the house," I say. "You know how my mother is."

She does. Most people around here do. "Well you holler if you have any problems."

"Thanks Mag."

Cody

I can still hear Dad in my ear about the wedding as I drive. Nowadays it's all I ever hear. I didn't mind so much before. I saw a picture of the cute little omega that would become my bride and decided she'd do. With her curly hair and freckles, she was pleasing. More importantly, she's the daughter of a very wealthy family, happy to sell their omega to a respectable name.

Dad told me they're not selling her, that it's a betrothal and completely different. I personally don't see the difference myself. Not that I'm judging. She'll have a much better life than most omegas.

Soon, I'll meet her in person. She'll be entering heat soon and Dad says that's the time to consummate. I've never been around an omega during their heat before and I'm definitely curious.

Yes, I'm looking forward to it. But at the same time, I have precious little freedom left. The dark of the night hides the joint in my hand. The city of Fairburne is busy and I really want to get off the road as fast as possible. I can't decide where I should go, though.

A strip club sounds promising, but it's a bit early.

Someone flicks their lights to alert me to the cop up ahead. I stamp the joint out on the floor and light up a cigarette as I drive by.

The cop waves my station wagon by with a nod.

Dad tried to make me give up the station wagon once in favor of a fancy Mustang. I like my car, though. Mustangs don't have enough room for fucking. I've fucked more holes in this baby than in my own bed.

Speaking of fucking, I need to find a bar and soon. It's been a week and my balls are tight.

My phone buzzes in the passenger seat and I don't have to look at it to know my Dad's calling me. God, twenty-two years old and he still tries to keep track of me like I'm a toddler. It's been worse lately. With wedding plans and dowries to organize, he's been a little more high-strung than usual. Which is saying a lot.

He's worried that I'm going to do something to screw up his plans. Maybe get arrested, which is likely, or make a bad impression on my future in-laws; also a possibility. Especially if they're as uptight as him.

Who am I kidding? I'm only looking forward to the hot piece of omega ass that's going to be mine. The rest is a pain in my asshole and I can't wait for it to be over.

I end up pulling over first chance I get at the first pub I see. *Mag's Place*. I've heard of it. Popular among omegas which to me means the perfect place to land a nice piece of ass.

The inside is warm with low lights, giving it a homey feeling. I immediately count about seven omegas in the pub. There's a table with several alphas poking and prodding a rather pleased looking omega who preens under the attention.

Looking around, I head toward the bar. There's a lone omega sitting there, head bent, face hidden under a mop of golden hair. Definitely worth checking out. Confidently, I walk over, taking a seat beside him.

I have to tread carefully though. The alpha bartender looks at me with sharp eyes.

"A pint of your cheapest," I say brightly.

She nods, and casts a glance at the boy beside me. If she knows him personally, I'll have to take my time. No sense in scaring him and getting myself kicked out. I admire her ethics, but in my opinion it's more trouble than it's worth.

"How you doing tonight?" I grin.

The omega looks up suddenly at me and behind thick, lopsided glasses are the biggest pair of green eyes I've ever seen. A frown adorns his heart shaped face and he bites his soft pink lip. He masks his scent well, but not enough to hide from me. I inhale the smell of old books and wood. He's a shifter too and I can barely contain my excitement.

Fairburne isn't exactly crawling with shifters. I wouldn't care but human boys are so delicate and frail that I can never quite give it my all.

My cock twitches in my jeans. Definitely him tonight. No doubt about it. It's as if his scent sings to me. I can't quite explain it, but it makes me want to take him right now. Tear off his clothes and fuck him right on the counter. The thought alone gets me hot and bothered.

"Okay," he says quietly before turning back to his drink.

My grin widens. I've always liked a challenge.

Chapter 2

Simon

I shift uncomfortably. The alpha sitting next to me won't stop staring. Did I not hide my heat well enough? I glance up but Mag had to go to the back. The night was going so well. For the first time in a while, I'd felt myself start to relax. Then this gorgeous alpha had to come in and choose me of all people to flirt with.

"My name's Cody Adams," the alpha says.

I don't dare look at him as I quietly reply. "Simon Malone."

"Dude, you reek!" the boy laughs. "I know that cologne. *Purple Rain*, right?"

I'm starting to feel pleasantly buzzed. My earlier misery fading into the background. Time to go. I down my second drink and move to stand up, but the alpha puts his hand on my arm lightly.

I turn to face him, ready to tell him that I need to get going. But at the sudden physical contact, my words die in my throat and my ass clenches. A flush creeps up my neck. The heats affecting me, making me more needy.

"Chill, I didn't mean anything by it," the alpha slurs his words, looking up at me through magnificent dark blue eyes. He brushes his dark brown hair out of his face, and gives me a wide, stunning grin. "Omegas are so touchy."

I need to leave. But as if under a spell, I sit back down. He's fucking beautiful. Definitely of higher breeding. Definitely a shifter. Wearing a t shirt that shows off every rippling muscle on his thick arms. His skin is milky and smooth and those lips pout out. I have the urge to brush my fingers against his sharp jaw. My virgin hole has never seen the light of day, but it's wet with need.

"I know right?" He grins again. "I'm gorgeous."

It might be the alcohol or the heat or both, but a warm flush spreads through me and my cheeks redden. My ass clenches impossibly tight and my cock twitches and stirs in my jeans. I tear my gaze away and stare stiffly ahead of me.

"You don't speak much do you?" he says, amused.

I shrug.

Cody claps me on the back. "Relax, man! I'm just looking for some casual fun. How about another drink on me?"

Before I can protest, he's flagging Jake down and ordering a couple ice teas. He pushes the drink toward me. "Have you ever had one before?"

I shake my head.

"You'll love it. Nectar of the Gods!"

I can't disobey and take a sip. He's right. It's amazing. My mouth is suddenly dry and I take another large swallow. I need to get out of here, but Cody asked me to stay and my heat won't let me disobey an alpha like him.

I need Mag and I need her right now.

"Good, huh?" He nudges my shoulder. I nod, draining the cup.

"I should probably go," I tell him. "Thanks for the drink."

I pull out my wallet to pay for the other two, but he pushes my hand down. "No need. I got you covered."

"Thanks," I mutter. Slowly, I manage to pull myself up. My legs feel like jelly, but with a few determined breathes, I manage to get myself outside without knocking into anything. The streets are empty, thank God, and I begin the cold trek home.

My head is spinning. There's shadows in every alleyway. I don't know how fast I'm moving, but I keep going. I think I bump into someone but I'm not sure. I mutter an apology anyways.

A car pulls up beside me and I flinch. A large hand is on my shoulder. "Easy buddy. Come on, I'll give you a ride."

"What?" I blink owlishly.

Cody shrugs. "A pretty little thing like you shouldn't be out like this."

"M'fine," I mumble.

"Dude, you just apologized to a streetlight."

Oh. At least I hadn't bumped into anyone. Cody guides my sluggish form to his car and I slump in the passenger seat, leaning my head against the cold window. I flinch as the driver's door slams. Cody giggles. He's probably almost as drunk as me and I really don't think he should be driving, but I can't bring myself to say anything.

"So where do you live?"

I shake my head. "Don't wanna go home. Too loud there."

"Well where do you want to go?"

He looks at me with such a look of goodwill and intensity that all I wanna do is launch myself at him and let him fuck my brains out. His eyes light up as I reach out and thumb his cheek. "You're beautiful," I tell him.

Dark blue eyes turn even darker. "I know," he says cockily. Then his mouth is on mine, tongue plunging hungrily.

I moan in delight, cock hardening against my jeans. His scent washes over me. A mix of whiskey, wine, and smoke. His hands grab my shoulders pulling me toward him. My small hand reaches up and runs through his jet black locks. His hand twists into my gold curls. His tongue runs over the roof of my mouth, exploring the ridges. Cleaning at the teeth. He pulls out and bites down on my lower lip, almost hard enough to draw blood. I arch and whimper as his hand grabs my crotch.

"Fuck, man," he breathes. "Get into the back. Right the fuck now."

How can I even think of disobeying?

He doesn't even wait. Just gets out of the car and for a second I ache with loss. But then he's dragging me out and flinging me into the empty space in the back of the car. Strong hands claw at my jeans. A button pops as he tears them off me. I bury my head in the thick blanket laid out under me.

"A plug," he whistles. "Kinky."

No. No no no. There's something important I need to tell him, but my brain's too scrambled with heat and need. The plug is swiftly yanked out and there's the sound of hard plastic hitting the floor. I whimper at the emptiness.

"Gonna fill you up nice and good," he whispers before licking the shell of my ear.

A thick finger is pushed into my weeping hole. Then a second, sending jolts of pleasure through me. My hands dig deep into the blanket as Cody scissors my hole. I want to tell him that there's no point. That it'll stretch as wide as he needs it to.

I crane my neck, trying to catch sight of his cock. I'm rewarded. Squinting through the darkness, glasses long forgotten on the floor, I can just make out a huge erect tip, positively dripping with precum.

That's the only look I get before his hands leave my hole, and a searing heat fills me. I cry out as he pounds into me, roughly and swiftly. Our skin slaps together as he rides me hard and fast. A hand presses flat on my back, pushing me farther into the seat. I buck and writhe but I'm nowhere near strong enough against the weight on top of me. My cock rubs flat against the leather, dripping and throbbing.

"Jesus Christ!" Cody moans.

Suddenly, he lets out a howl, hot seed spilling side of me and the orgasm hits me like a tsunami. My spine locks into an arch and my cock shoots its seed all over the car seat, slicking against my belly. I push my ass back into Cody, needing desperately for him to fill me as I ride the orgasm out. His cum drips down my legs in rivers as he pumps hard. Tears streak my face as I writhe beneath him. A feeling of such completeness overtakes me as he fills me to the brim. My heart thrums happily.

Cody sighs and drops on top of me and I let the safety of his weight pin me down. His hand strokes my cheek and his lips press against the back of my head. My eyes start to slide shut as drowsiness overtakes me. My big sexy alpha wraps his arms around me and I allow myself to drift off.

Cody

The first ray of sun pierces my eyes and I swear at the pounding in my brain. Hangovers are never fun. I look around blearily, blinking until my vision clears. What the hell happened last night? With a groan, I try to sit up, but find my arm is pinned under something warm and sticky. The last of the sleep clears and I raise an eyebrow at the naked boy lying underneath me.

That's right. The bar. The sexy little thing sitting alone at the bar. Then the car. I chuckle and run my free hand through his hair as he snores softly. With groan at the migraine trying to form, I carefully dislodge my arm from beneath the warm body and pull myself up. My cock twitches and hardens and it takes me a second to realize it's because it's still lodged in Simon's ass. I look at him, still sleeping, and a mischievous smile crosses my lips.

Quickly and as gently as I can, I give my cock a few hard pumps through that warm little hole until a modest orgasm shakes my frame. Satisfied, I pull my now empty cock out, admiring how the white cum drips out, smeared across those perfect cheeks.

There's a warm glow in my chest and I hum a tune as I pull my clothes back on, barely feeling the biting cold. Simon's jeans are still pooled beside us. There's another blanket folded up in the corner and I grab it and drape it over the sleeping form. With a satisfied nod, I climb into the drivers seat feeling elated. Usually I'd just wake him up and drive him back to wherever he came from, but there's a deep satisfaction that I haven't felt before.

Maybe this time I'll go home with a number.

First things first. Breakfast, preferably waffles with berries and whipped cream. I should probably get the little omega something too, but he looks peaceful and I don't want to wake him up, which is kind

of weird. I've never cared before. But there's something in my chest that seems to have latched itself onto the tiny angelic creature curled up in my car. I want to take care of him. At least for the morning.

The day is young, and I'm in too good of a mood to think too deeply about this sudden change in routine. I find my cell phone sitting on the dash and make a quick call to Ricky's All Day Breakfast. I order the Belgian waffles for myself. Glancing at the figure curled up in the back, I order the buttermilk pancakes for him. Everyone likes pancakes right?

I wouldn't usually go out of my way for an omega, but fuck last night was amazing.

I drop the styrofoam containers in the passenger seat and drive out somewhere quiet to eat. Simon just starts to stir as I pull down a more secluded road surrounded by trees. I've always liked the forest. He sits up, head peeking groggily over behind the backseat, and he wraps the blanket around himself tightly. "Where am I?"

His curly yellow hair is sticking out in every direction possible, and big green eyes are still slightly glazed over. I hand him the container of pancakes.

"Morning sunshine!" I chirp. "Hope you like pancakes."

He rubs his eyes adorably and clutching the blanket close, climbs over into the backseat. I get a glimpse of his pale little ass in the air before he settles, wrapping the blanket around himself. I hand him the container and he takes it looking confused. He's still got hangover fog, and I wonder if he remembers last night. For some reason that sends a pang of annoyance through me. I shouldn't care if he remembers, but I want him to.

"What happened?" he asks through a mouthful of pancake.

I swallow my bite of waffle. "Well I might have gotten you drunk and fucked you like a dog last night."

Honesty is the best policy I always say. Simon chokes on his pancakes and I hand him a bottle of water. "You better remember it because it was one of my best performances. Seriously I don't think I've ever had a fuck that good."

Simon is red faced and his mouth opens and closes like a fish. I dreamily imagine what they would feel like around my cock. Yep, I'll definitely have to get his number. In fact, maybe I should just take him home with me. Ask Dad to make him my new butler.

Like that would happen. But hey, that's what booty calls are for.

"Oh fuck..." Simon whispers in the back, his pancakes drop to the floor.

Confused I glance at him in the rear view. "What's the matter with you?"

He doesn't seem to hear me. Just rocks back and forth with his face buried in his hands. Anger flares inside of me at the little ingrate. I give him probably the best fuck of his life, even sticking around to buy him breakfast afterward, and the little shit acts like this?

I shouldn't care. I really shouldn't fucking care. I've had omegas whine and moan about their choices in my car more than once. I usually just rolled my eyes and dropped them off, uncaring because I had a good fuck and that's all that was important. I don't know why I'm so angry now.

"Seriously what the fuck is your problem?"

Chapter 3

Simon

This is bad. This is so fucking bad. All I wanted was a night to myself, where I could feel safe and maybe a bit buzzed. That's all. My heat was isolating. Crippling. It was making me crazy.

Now it's gone.

Cody is oblivious, glaring at me from the front seat. The idiot has no idea what we've done and I want to rip my hair out in frustration. I realize I'm going to have to spell it out for him, and the thought makes me feel very, very afraid. Alphas are unpredictable, and I have no idea what kind of man Cody is. Affluent. Spoiled. Carefree. Definitely doesn't want to be tied down.

Shit shit shit.

"Christ, I wasn't that bad was I?" he growls. "Seriously man you're pissing me off now."

He's proud. Most alphas are. I'm insulting him by acting like this, but I'm so fucking scared right now. I've heard of accidental bonds before. There's all sorts of horror stories of the lengths alphas go to deal with it.

"Well?" He demands, making me flinch. "Answer me omega!"

There it is. The order. I can't disobey him now.

"I was in heat," I murmur, not daring to look up. There's an unbearably long moment of silence.

"What?"

"I was in heat," I repeat, peeking up at Cody through my bangs. I expect to see rage, or panic, or even some sort of sick happiness. But instead all I get is confusion.

"So..." He shrugs. "So what?"

I stare at him in disbelief. "Seriously? Do you have any idea what this means?"

God! I'm fucked. I've been metaphorically and literally fucked

to hell.

Cody just blinks stupidly. I sigh and rub my forehead. My skull feels full of mud, maybe with spikes of metal scraping at the edges. "What do you know about omegas in heat."

"Well," Cody says. "It means that any alpha around is going to want to fuck you, which I suppose explains why I chased after your fine ass last night. I also know that your hole was all wet and ready for me. You're a kinky boy aren't you?" He wiggles his eyebrows at me, that stupid grin back on his face.

"Anything else?" I ask dryly.

"I don't know, I skipped that class."

My head throbs even harder. I'm going to have to spell this out for him. "I should never have been outside during my heat. It means that my body and soul were looking for an alpha to bond to. It means you and I are bonded together now."

Cody's eyebrows raise. He still doesn't understand what this means. At least that stupid grin is gone.

Somehow, maybe it's because I'm exhausted and still a bit drunk, I manage to look him in the eye. "It means that you aren't going to get it up for anyone else but me for a long, long time."

There's a moment of silence as Cody stares at me blankly. My hands fist around my blanket and I watch as all the colour drains from his face. Without a word, he gets out of the car. I clutch the blanket tighter around me as he opens my door and I'm dragged to my feet. The hard ground is freezing under my feet. I shiver from the cold. He slams me against the side of the car, snarling.

"You little fucker!" He growls. "You little shit! Do you have any idea what you've done to me?"

I cry out as he slams me against the metal, again and again. The blanket drops from my shoulders, leaving me shivering and naked. Pain shoots through my head and back and I gasp and whimper. A bit of last night's cum dribbles down my leg, leaving cold trails. I claw at his hands but it's futile. He's too strong. He raises a fist and I clench my eyes shut, trying to distance myself from the pain and terror that I feel.

It doesn't come though. After a few moments, I peak at him through my eyelashes, a few stray tears slipping down my cheeks. He drops his fist to his side and lets go of me, looking defeated. I can feel the bond inside of me, wanting to comfort him, to please my alpha, and I hate it. I hate it so much.

"Shit," He whispers. "I'm so fucked."

A harsh laugh escapes me. "You? How are you fucked? All you'd need to do is-" I clamp my hand over my mouth, cursing my own stupidity.

Wild eyes meet my frightened ones. "What?" He demands. "What do I have to do? Tell me now!"

The bond won't let me disobey. I swallow the lump in my throat. "Kill me."

My eyes squeeze shut again and an icy chill spreads through my veins that has nothing to do with the cold breeze that ruffles my blanket. This is my fault. I deserve what's coming. "Death will break the bond. If you kill me, you're free."

It happens all the time. Omegas go missing and are found dead within a few days. Nothing ever comes of it. The omega shouldn't have left their house. They shouldn't have fucked around during their heat.

Sometimes alphas willingly bond themselves to an omega against their will. The perfect little sex slave who can't leave because it hurts too much to be apart, no matter what the alpha does to them.

I wonder how he'll do it? A blow to the head? A knife to the belly? Maybe he's got a gun and will make it quick. Or maybe I'll feel his hands wrap around my throat, slowly choking the life out of me. He'll leave my naked body at the side of the road and drive off, back to his life.

Instead, I feel the blanket wrap around my body. I look up in surprise. Cody's eyes are full of anger, but defeat and exhaustion lurk beneath.

"Fuck that," he says gruffly. "I ain't no murderer."

He takes a step back, and I pull the blanket tighter around myself as he gets back in the car. Weary eyes meet mine.

"Well? You coming or what?"

Cody

Stupid omega. Looking at me like I'd actually kill him. Seriously? Jesus Christ!

Gripping the steering wheel hard, my eyes occasionally flick to the rear view mirror, watching the miserable little lump in the back. Why is he miserable? I'm the one who's going to catch hell. Maybe it would be easier just to kill the little bastard...

Wordlessly, I pull into a cheap motel. I make sure to slam the door, taking some satisfaction in seeing Simon flinch. I stalk toward the entrance and book us a cheap room for the week. After that's done, I pull out my phone and call my dad.

"Where the hell are you?" he growls.

"Hello to you too," I say sourly.

"Don't use that tone with me, boy. Answer me."

"What? A twenty-two year old can't go out for a good time?"

"Cody, I swear to God-"

"I'm in Ellis. You know, the village out in the boonies?"

"What in God's name are you doing there?"

I sigh, mind racing for a believable story. "Car broke down here. It's in the shop and it'll be about a week."

Dad sighs. "I'll send a car for you."

"No no," I say casually. "I'm just gonna lie low. I could use the peace and quiet."

"Dammit, Cody. The Jacksons are going to be here on Sunday!"

"I'll be back by then."

"You'd better."

I sigh as I hang up. Dad's always a pleasure to talk to. Alright. First order of business. Get the omega into the room. Second, find him clothes that aren't covered in spunk. Third. Booze. Lots of it.

Pulling the car around to the far side, I haul Simon out and drag him into the room by the arm, taking pleasure in hearing him whimper. Good. He should be afraid of me. The dingy hotel room is repulsive. The dark carpets are worn and stained and the walls are splotchy. I throw Simon roughly onto the bed farthest from the door and run a hand through my short blond hair.

"You say there's no other way to break a soul bond?" I ask.

His eyes widen and I roll my eyes. "Oh knock it off, I'm not going to kill you."

"No known way," he murmurs.

"Spells? Potions? Come on, you look like a geek. Think of something!" I growl.

Simon shakes his head. "I don't know, okay? I don't know..."

Growling, I head for the door. "I'm going out. You'd better as fuck be here when I get back."

I don't look behind me as the door slams and stomp out to the car. After banging my head against the steering wheel, I pull out in search of food and sundries. This cheap motel's soap and towels aren't going to cut it.

Luckily, there's a department store nearby. I grab a cart, feeling far too much like a peasant for my liking, and find that I have no idea where to start. I decide on clothes first. I don't know Simon's size. He's tiny and I entertain the thought of checking out the section for teenage girls. I end up with several large black and grey sweaters and a couple t shirts, and two pairs of jeans. I throw a belt into the cart as well. There's a rack of winter jackets and I grab one. I can't have the kid freezing to death on me.

Next is soap. They don't have any of my usual brands, but I settle for the most expensive bottles they have. The towels are also cheap, but they sure beat whatever rags the motel will have to offer.

Food's something I'm not picky about. Anything that can be made in a microwave goes into the cart. There's gotta be a few takeouts joints. I pay for the stuff, knowing I probably look like a new bachelor. The omega cashier looks up at me with wide eyes and I glare down at him. Omegas are not my favorite people right now.

There's a liquor store attached to the side of the store and I load up on as much beer and malt liquors as I can fit into the trunk.

When I get back to the motel, I freeze at the sight. I knew he was a shifter, but I wasn't quite expecting to see the tiny little wolf curled up on the bed. God, I've seen year-old pups bigger than him, and I can barely contain the snort.

Simon looks up with a start. Quickly, he changes back into his equally tiny human form. I throw the large bag of clothes onto the bed. Hesitantly, he looks at it stupidly before giving me a blank look.

"Well you're not going to just sit around naked are you?" I snap.

He blushes and goes through the bag. At least he's not looking me like I'm a monster anymore. If anything, he's the real monster here. I'm just an innocent caught up in his mess. I busy myself cramming the food into the fridge. I crack open a beer because hey it's six pm somewhere in the world.

Simon

So he doesn't seem to plan to kill me. That takes some of the edge off my panic. But I'm still stuck with an angry alpha who has no problem tossing me around like a rag doll. I pull the far too large sweater and jeans on, thankful that he bought me a belt as well.

I sit back down on the bed with my hands in my lap and head bowed like the good little omega I am, resisting the urge to fiddle with my glasses. Cody starts chugging a beer and I want nothing more than to disappear into the floor. The silence is suffocating as he puts away what looks like enough food to last us a month, and simultaneously give us heart disease in a week.

"So what now?"

Cody glares. "You figure out a way to fix this."

I sigh. "There isn't. I've told you."

He shakes his head. "Uh uh. You said there's no *known* way. I've bought us a week. We're going to hit up every bookstore in the province if that's what it takes."

"Only a week?" I raise an eyebrow. "Why the deadline?"

Cody slumps down on the other bed. "I'm betrothed. That's why."

My eyes widen. "Are you serious?"

He nods miserably. "A high breed omega from a wealthy family. They're coming on Sunday. I'm expected to marry this guy, bond with him, and produce some nice alpha heirs. Now I can't do that if I can't even get to half mast."

"So what exactly were you doing fucking me then?" I can't help but bite out.

"I said I'm engaged. I didn't say I'm married yet," Cody sneers. "Better question, what the fuck were you doing at a bar during your heat?"

"I just wanted a quiet night," I sniff. "Just an evening to get buzzed and get some air away from-"

No. I won't tell him. Thankfully he doesn't seem to care enough to press for details. I flop onto my back, hands resting against my chest. I might as well start digging my grave now.

"Well," Cody says finally. "Let's get to it."

"Mm?" I just want to sleep forever, but a pillow hits me in the face.

"Spellbooks, potions books, sex rituals, whatever we can find. We are going to find a way out of this, one way or another." His eyes glint dangerously.

I huff. "You don't think people have tried? There are omegas who would give anything for a way to break a bond. What makes you think we'll find one?"

I yelp as his strong hand clenches around my collar, effortlessly dragging me off the bed. We're almost nose to nose and I can feel his warm breath on my face. I squirm and swallow hard, but I know better than trying to fight him.

"Because we've got one week before I have to be home. One week to fix this or I get disowned. That's a lot of inheritance but I might be able to deal. You on the other hand, will quietly disappear if my Dad finds out about you."

I burst into tears.

Cody growls and shoves me back onto the bed, leaving me to stew in my misery and I hate him. I hate him for sitting down next to me, for getting me drunk, for being too stupid to recognize heat when he smells it.

I hate him. I hate how the bond won't let me hate him.

Chapter 4

Cody

The little ball of misery riding shotgun is seriously getting on my nerves. His eyes are still puffy and every so often he sniffs. I feel

like crying myself, in between the waves of stress and anger where I just want to shake him.

His scent is also rather distracting, filling the car and making me want to fuck him. Is that what the bond does? Makes me hard constantly? How do bonded couples deal with this shit? I seriously just fucked him last night. You'd think that would be enough to satisfy us for at least a day. The car's heater just makes it worse.

We've only been driving for ten minutes and you could cut the tension with a knife. Ellis has very few bookstores and I need better resources. There's no way we can go back to Fairburne and risk getting spotted. Dad has eyes everywhere.

So now we're driving to the next town over, which is about an hour's drive, and I'm stuck with emo boy. Canavan River is smaller than Fairburne, but larger than Ellis. A quick check online shows they have an abundance of antique shops and goodwill. There's bound to be something there.

I turn on the stereo and plug in my phone with the music on shuffle. I'm not dealing with another fifty minutes of brooding silence, and I need a distraction from the guilt of making the omega cry. Stupid bond. I have nothing to feel guilty for.

The sound of bluegrass fills the car and I let myself relax. This is what I needed. I can just get lost in the music and pretend I'm alone. My hands tap on the steering wheel and I hum when the banjo starts up.

I've always liked the banjo. Dad says it's a hillbilly instrument for the inbred. For someone who prides himself on being sophisticated and cultured I marvel at his ignorance sometimes. My anger slowly seeps away.

There's movement out of the corner of my eye and I glance over to my passenger. Simon's nodding his head to the beat, a smile tugging at his lips. This is the omega from last night. Smiling and relaxed.

I start to sing along out loud. Loudly and off-key, watching his reaction. His smile grows slightly bigger and he starts to hum along. For just a little while, maybe we can forget about this whole mess.

The music is therapeutic and, for a little while, I can let go of my resentful feelings toward this kid. I sing louder and he starts to sing too. His voice is better than mine. Light and soft. I imagine us jamming together. Me on my banjo, him at a microphone.

Before long I spot the sign *Welcome to Canavan River*. I pull over and type bookstore into my GPS. The first one's pretty close. I turn the music off as we drive through the small town. Simon's big eyes scan our surroundings, taking in everything. I wonder if he's ever left the city before now.

The first bookstore doesn't have much. Just basic spells and potions for the common public. Simon ventures off as I grab whatever I can and take them to the front, stacking them up in front of the cashier, who raises an eyebrow.

"Big project planned?"

"Recreational fun," I shrug. Craning my neck, I scan over the shelves for the wayward omega. For just a moment, I wonder if he's taken the opportunity to bolt and my eyes narrow. If he has, I think I might kill him after all.

But he reappears as quickly as he disappeared and I'm surprised to see him carrying a couple hardcovers. He sets them down beside mine and I read the spines. One is a textbook about the relationship between omegas and alphas, the other is a history book about various soul bonds.

Good boy.

The cashier rings up the purchases, and gives us a smile. "You're an adorable couple, you know that?"

Simon blushes and stares at his feet. I give her a fake smile as she bags the books. She's a pretty beta and I don't want to embarrass her. Simon strays behind me a bit as we walk out to the car and dump the bags in the backspace.

The second place on my list is a second hand. They have more options and I take advantage. There's a whole section on sex rituals and I slip a couple books about sex rituals and orgasms into the basket. There's another section about blood rituals and Simon scans carefully before picking a few out of there. I grab whatever books I can find about spells and bonds and Simon goes to get a second basket.

The cashier looks like Christmas has come early when we ring up the purchases. I have a suspicion that he's overcharging me as I pay, but I don't feel like a confrontation. Plus the way the alpha is leering at Simon makes me edgy.

We stop for lunch when Simon's stomach growls loudly and I remember he barely ate any breakfast. To my delight, the diner we stop at has lamb burgers. Simon orders the spinach ravioli and I wrinkle my nose in disgust.

"How can you eat that crap?"

"It's good for you," he mumbles.

I roll my eyes.

We stop at a gas station on the way back. Simon runs inside and comes back out with four notebooks and a box of pens. I groan inwardly. If there was one thing in school I hated more than math, it was taking notes. I notice an electronic store nearby and casually walk out with a laptop. We'd be stupid not to use all of our resources.

On the drive back, I enjoy Simon's uncomfortable squirming as I light up a joint. I offer him a toke and he looks at me with eyes as big as saucers and I can't help but laugh. This kid has a stick jammed so far up his ass that it's a wonder he can sit down.

Maybe I can fix that.

Simon

Just my luck to get bonded to a felon.

I know he's blowing smoke in my face on purpose and it's all I can do not to gag on it. I try to point out that driving under the influence is a criminal offense and I don't like the wide grin he gives me as he takes a particularly deep puff. My eyes flick nervously ahead of us, waiting for a cop car to come barreling out of a random driveway.

"You're going to get us pulled over," I mutter.

"Eh, we'll be fine," he says.

"You should be driving with both hands."

"Are you driving? No? Then shut up."

His folk and bluegrass music blasts through the car again and I can't help but relax. He has good taste in music, especially for someone so rich. I've heard of the Adams. Richard Adams is the head of a pharmaceutical company and makes a killing. His father, Brian Adams, was a political figure and served as Fairburne's mayor successfully for ten years.

When I picture the son and grandson of such men, I picture some sort of fancy sports car. I picture designer clothes and either classical or rock music. Fencing classes and trips to Paris and Rome.

Cody wears worn jeans and a leather jacket that look like they popped up from a thrift store. He drives a station wagon and listens to music with banjo solos. He has no issues going to little pubs and picking up omegas far beneath his class.

"Try some," he says, holding the joint out again. "It'll help you relax."

"That stuff gives you lung cancer," I say.

"Bull," he scoffs.

Before the soul bond, I remember him being charming, grinning at me like I wasn't dirt under his shoes. *That was when he just wanted a good fuck,* I remind myself. I was nothing to him then, and I'm nothing to him now. I just have to remember that.

The joint is shoved in my face again. I try to push him away, but to my horror, he lets go of the wheel.

"What the hell?" I groan, reaching over to grab the wheel and keep us from going off the road.

He just grins and a large hand clamps over my jaw, forcing my mouth open. I groan and try to jerk my head away, but his other hand forces the joint between my lips and he shoves my mouth shut. The smoke fills my mouth and I groan.

"Inhale, and I'll let go," he says, still grinning widely.

"Mmph," I stare at him wide eyed.

"Come on," He urges. "A little won't kill you."

Oh I hate him! Hesitantly, I take a drag and immediately start hacking. He laughs and lets go of my mouth, turning his attention back to the road.

"Fuck you," I say between gasps.

"Oh suck it up," he says. "It's good for you."

Jesus, he likes to push me around. I try to tell myself that he's an asshole all the while ignoring the way my heart flutters when he grabs me or shoves me. The memory of being dominated makes my hole clench and my cock twitch. Cody's probably feeling the same way, regardless of his true feelings. Soul bonds won't let us go for too long without sex before it becomes unbearable. Hopefully we can make the week. I'm worried that any sex we have now will only strengthen the bond.

We make it back to Ellis and Cody pulls into one last store. I remember him mentioning it. A used bookstore that looks like it's seen better days, if the cracks in the plaster are any indication.

The shopkeeper's an omega, surprisingly. Cody ignores him and beelines for the books. I hang back awkwardly. The omega looks at me with piercing gray eyes. His nut brown hair is pulled back into a ponytail.

"You okay?" he asks.

I shrug. My eyes droop slightly and I can feel the weed messing with me slightly. "It's been a long day."

He nods understandingly. In fact, he looks tired himself. His skin is pale and his eyes are sunken in with purple bags just starting to show. He kind of looks like the front singer of a rock band.

"You're not from here are you?"

I shake my head. "We're just hanging around for the week."

"Honeymoon?"

"God no," I laugh. "We're kind of stuck with each other for a bit. I'm Simon Malone."

"Dallas Holland."

"Boy!" a voice suddenly shouts, nearly making me jump out of my skin.

A tall, muscular alpha emerges from the backroom. "Dallas we've got a customer! What the hell are you doing just standing there?"

The omega gives me a pained look before turning to face his boss. "He didn't seem to want help."

The alpha grabs him by the ponytail and jerks his head up. "Did you ask?"

"Sorry sir," he mutters.

The alpha's not talking about me I realize. He's talking about Cody. Cody's an alpha and in his eyes, a proper customer. I shrink back as the man's dark eyes lock onto me.

"The fuck you looking at?" he growls.

I bow my head in a submissive gesture. He yanks on Dallas's ponytail again, making him yelp and I can't help but flinch at the sound of pain. With a sigh, he lets go and stomps off to the back, most likely to suck up to Cody.

Dallas stumbles forward slightly, hands gripping the desk so hard that his knuckles turn white. I can see he's shaking.

I step up to the desk and lean in. "You okay?" I whisper as quietly as I can.

He nods. "Business has been slow this month. Brett's pretty stressed."

Biting my lip and glancing up to make sure we're still alone, I reach forward and place my hand over his. Cody would freak if he knew what I was about to do, and I certainly don't know where this little bout of courage has come from.

"We're staying at the Gold River Motel. If you need help, our room number's two-oh-nine."

The look of surprise and gratitude on his face makes me feel like I could take on ten alphas and I give him a soft smile. Cody will just have to deal, I decide. I may be an omega, but I refuse to let him control everything.

The owner of the shop comes stomping back up and we quickly back away from each other. Cody's close behind, looking more annoyed than anything. He drops his armful of books on the counter and glares at the other alpha as he pays.

I decide I don't want to know.

Suddenly his hand is latched around my wrist again, dragging me out of the store and back to the car. I look behind me and Dallas gives me a sympathetic wave.

"Fucking worm," Cody growls, slamming the door shut.

I don't ask, but he tells me anyway. "Seriously it's a wonder they're still in business. Nobody wants to shop with some caveman breathing in their ear about sales!"

A small laugh escapes me. "He did look like a caveman, didn't he?"

"I pity the poor bastard working for him," Cody mutters.

Well that's a good sign. Pity's close to sympathy right?

Back at the motel, Cody cracks open a beer and I help myself to a coke. The fridge and freezer are loaded up with enough food to either keep us alive for two months, or clog our arteries within a week. I don't consider myself a health nut or anything, but would it have killed him to at least get some apples?

Looking back over at the stacks of books on the floor, I sigh. I'm still not hopeful. Not at all. But there's no sense in telling Cody that. I take a seat on the floor, wondering where to begin. Cody's busy microwaving a bowl of macaroni and I wrinkle my nose in disgust. How anyone could eat that slop is beyond me.

I start by sorting the books by category. Spells, potions, sex, voodoo, and history. I raise an eyebrow at the one about orgasms and shoot Cody a dirty look. He grins and waves. I roll my eyes. At least one of us should take this seriously.

Feeling like I'm in a group project, I push my glasses up and flip open the first spellbook, trying to ignore the dizziness. This is going to be a long week.

Chapter 5

Cody

"Oh, my God," I moan. "Reading is so boring."

Simon is lying on the bed, chewing on the tip of his pen, on his second spellbook now. He looks up at me and rolls his eyes. I've been watching his notebook fill up with notes and scribbles since yesterday evening, and he keeps reaching for the little strips of paper he's made to bookmark certain pages.

I'm about halfway through my first book, and I'm now ninety percent sure Dad paid off more than a few teachers to get me to graduation. Seriously, most of these books are useless. I don't know what he could possibly be writing down. I peek at his notebook on a bathroom break, but for the life of me, I can't read his chicken scratch.

Defeated, I throw my book down after noticing I've been reading the same sentence for the last five minutes.

It's not just that research is boring. That's the tip of the iceberg. The rest of the iceberg is the invisible cock ring and balls that feel like they're about to burst. I've been in and out of the bathroom all day, pumping away, trying to relieve some of this pressure. It helps a bit, but there's only the smallest trickle of cum, and the relief never lasts long. It's a band-aid solution and nothing more.

Two days. That's all it's been since we fucked, and already I'm losing my fucking mind.

If Simon's at all bothered by it, he's doing a hell of a lot better than me. He thinks I don't know, but I can see the end of the plug, just barely visible through his jeans. I want to rip it out and stuff my cock in there so badly.

Simon told me that he thinks the bond would only get stronger if we fuck, though. He says we shouldn't encourage anything. I skimmed through the history book about omegas and unfortunately there is speculation that backs up the claim.

Last night was pure torture. I listened to Simon's steady breathing, my cock twitching, knowing that he was only one bed over. A flicker of movement caught my eye and I could see him rubbing himself in his sleep. I could barely bite back a moan.

I stood up and hovered over him. For just a second, I wondered if he would wake up if I slipped in there really quickly. Instead I bit down hard on my hand and retreated to the bathroom. I didn't come out for two hours.

Wearily, I sigh and pour myself a glass of malt liquor. Simon shakes his head. "Seriously?"

"Shut it," I growl, downing the shot. I set the bottle and glass down on my nightstand, beside my stash and ashtray. Flopping down on my bed, I grab a joint and light it up. Weed helps a little. It doesn't take the aching away, but it distracts me from the worst of it. I wonder how hard it would be to find some shrooms in this dinky little town.

"Do you have to smoke that in here?" Simon mutters.

"Don't be such a whiny little bitch," I retort.

He huffs and goes back to the book. I know I'm being lazy and sticking Simon with all the work. We're both tired and cranky and I can smell his need, even if he doesn't show it. My eyes rake over his round little ass.

Simon glares at me and tosses a book onto my stomach, eliciting an annoyed grunt. I flip it open and see it's a book on voodoo. A notebook follows shortly, landing beside me.

"Just skim through it," he says. "Bookmark any pages you find about blood magic and bonding spells."

"Bossy little shit, aren't you?" I growl, pouring myself another shot.

Lazily, I look through the pages. There are spells to banish spirits, summon spirits, and to my amusement, spells to cause excessive gas, and hysterical laughing. I copy those ones down into my notebook to use for later. I know a few people to practice on.

There's a list of herbs and their uses. I don't understand much of what it says, but I bookmark that area.

My cock hardens again and I take a moment to slip off to the

bathroom, ignoring Simon's exasperated sigh. Quickly, I pull my dick out, and give it a few hard pumps, picturing Simon naked and on the bed with his ass in the air, reading for the taking.

The orgasm that hits me is weak. The stream of cum that splashes into the shower is weaker. When I come, it's usually a river that lasts for a good twenty seconds, coating everything in it's path. Now it's a trickling stream that's drying out more with each passing hour.

I stomp back into the room and pour myself another shot.

Fuck can his ass go any higher? I toss the book to the side and sit up straight on the bed. My omega father taught me breathing exercises once and I try to see if that'll help me relax. But the plug up Simon's ass is more visible than ever and there's a really annoying clock on the wall that keeps ticking.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick-

I pour another shot even though I'm already sufficiently buzzed.

It's starting to get dark outside. Simon sips on a glass of cranberry juice, licking his plush pink lips. God, how does he stand this?

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

I'm throwing that clock away first chance I get, I swear to God.

I breathe in and out and it doesn't help at all because his scent is invasive and smothering. The voodoo book lays forgotten beside me.

Simon was right. This is useless. I might as well kiss my fortune goodbye now. I figure I could probably make a decent living as a wizard after this though. I grabbed a book labeled *Love Rituals* (original title. Seriously?) and flipped through that earlier. I regretted it almost immediately when I found a spell to make an orgasm last ten minutes. There was another that'll double the amount of cum. My cock had ached with longing.

Fuck, Simon's sucking on the tip of his pen now. His cheeks hollowed out against the plastic. I want to shove my cock in there so badly and feel his tiny little mouth around my massive dick.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

The breathing isn't working. My heart is pounding and I'm coated with sweat. The bond is humming in my chest, demanding to be fulfilled and fuck I can't do this anymore.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Cock.

Simon lets out the tiniest little sigh and I'm fucking done. Without a word, I haul him up and throw him on the bed, ignoring the indignant yelp. Immediately I'm upon him, clawing at his pants. His glasses lie forgotten on the floor.

"The fuck, Cody!" he yells. "Get off of me!"

"Shut it," I snarl. "I know you need it too."

His tiny hands claw uselessly at my wrists as I yank at his shirt. My cock throbs at his whimpers as the fabric of his shirt tears. I'm not in control anymore, the bond is. Any rational thought is gone as his milky chest is exposed. It's almost like there's a red haze in my vision, hot with need. My hands immediately go to his jeans, fumbling with the button.

"Cody! Please!" he begs, but that only hardens me further.

"Learn your place, omega!" I growl.

But then he whips his head forward, sinking his teeth into my wrist hard enough to draw blood. I gasp and his other hand darts out, grabbing my ear.

"No!" he screams. "No no no!"

I stumble back and he's scrambling up and pressing himself against the wall. I look at him incredulously, clutching my injured wrist. "Are you fucking serious? Who the hell do you think you are omega?"

But his eyes are misting over and the red haze starts to recede. He gives me a look of utter terror. My cock starts to deflate and I take a step forward. I don't like the way he flinches away from me.

"Just...stay away," he whimpers.

"But..." I feel so confused. "You want it too! The bond makes you want it too!"

Before I can react, Simon lunges for the door, flinging it open and disappearing into the night. I catch a glimpse of tears spilling down his cheeks. I'm left dumbfounded, in the middle of the room with my cock hanging out. Strange. I don't even remember pulling it out...

Fuck.

Simon

My arms are wrapped tightly around my bare chest and I shiver in the cold. I don't know where I'm going, only that I want to get as far away from that hotel room as possible.

The worst part is my half-hard cock, eager to be dominated.

"Learn your place, omega."

Because that's all I am. An object for sex and submission. It's stupid, but for a little while today, I thought Cody might be different. Sure he's bossy and spoiled, but he bought me clothes and made me food. I should have known better.

My skin crawls as I remember the feeling of him pinning me down and I hug myself tighter.

The signs were there today. His endless trips to the bathroom. All evening his breathing was getting more and more erratic and he couldn't stop twitching. When he started drinking, I should have gotten out of there. I don't know where I'd go, but still...

I should have known because I've been feeling it too. The plug helps slightly, but there's an ache in my hole that I've never felt before. When I woke up this morning, my underwear was already soaked through.

The road I walk along is on the edge of a forest. The ground is covered with a light coat of snow, burning cold against my bare feet. I'd never been to Ellis before, and I have never seen so many trees in one place. I keep close to the tree line, as if they'll hide me from the world and sniff pathetically. I can't go back to the motel now. I'm too far from home to walk. I have no money for the bus. Maybe I could find a shop and use their phone. I'll call Mag and she'll come and pick me up.

It'll be like none of this ever happened. Except for the fact that I'm bonded and owned. I've heard stories of what happens when you fight a bond. The omegas ass becomes increasingly tight and wet until it's unbearable to even sit down. The alphas cock hardens and no amount of jerking off will release it. Sooner or later, I'll have to go back to that motel room, despite my terror.

I don't notice the large, hulking men until I smell them. An icy shiver of fear shoots up my spine as I hear the footsteps behind me.

Hesitantly, I glance over my shoulder. Despite my blurry vision, I can make out four men, all alphas. They don't look kind either. One, a large man with a weathered face and black greasy hair, grins at me. I take a shaky breath and force myself to keep walking. But I can tell they're following me. One of them is laughing.

Stupid. I don't think I've ever been so fucking stupid in my life. One of them picks up the pace and that's all it takes for me to break into a run. All four of them are cackling. I'm nothing but a hunt to them. A thing to be caught and dominated, no how much I scream and fight.

Tears blur my vision as I veer off the road and into the forest. I can hear them behind me, closing in. My heart is beating frantically and the sweat on my skin makes me shiver. Every instinct demands that I shift immediately, but shifting now would be useless. My clothes are too baggy and my wolf would quickly become tangled in the fabric.

Besides, I can catch the scent of shifters. These men would no doubt outrun and overpower me within minutes.

A branch catches me by the ankle and I cry out as I go down.

Scrambling, mindless terror overtaking me, I'm almost to my

feet when a rough hand grabs me by the shoulder and effortlessly flips me onto my back. Someone grabs my wrists, pinning them above my head. I whimper pitifully as someone grabs my crotch.

"Whatcha running for?" the greasy man leers. "We'll take good care of you."

"Please-" my voice is a whisper. "Just let me go."

The alpha cocks his head. He's obviously the leader of this group. "Why would we do that? A pretty little half-naked omega like you? You're just begging for it, aren't you?"

His breath smells like whiskey. I squirm against the hands pinning me down and the man sitting on my legs. His hands go to the button on my jeans and I start to scream, but something is shoved into my mouth.

I look up at my attacker, blinking through my tears. He runs a hand over my face, delighting in the muffled whimpers. "Don't worry, I'll make this good."

I want Cody. Fuck! I don't care if he wants to fuck me into tomorrow. I'll let him and I won't complain at all. Anyone but these disgusting men.

He starts to pull my jeans down, inciting another cry from me, when a deafening roar fills the woods. The hands holding my wrists release me and the weight on my legs disappears, but I can't move.

"Fuck, man!" one of the men yells. "We didn't know he belonged to you!"

Blinking through my tears, I look up to see the largest, jet black wolf I've ever seen. Blue eyes glint in the moonlight, sharp white fangs bare.

Cody.

The other men shift suddenly, making me dizzy as four large grizzlies take their place. I squeeze my eyes shut and shrink back in terror as the woods are filled with the sounds of snarling and roaring. Cody can't take on four bears and I can't watch him try. I flinch with every yelp and growl of pain as the shifters battle. I don't know how long it goes on for, but it's loud and the coppery scent of blood reaches my nose. Then there's one last deafening roar before the forest goes silent.

Suddenly something wet and warm nudges my face and I shrink back, bracing myself for the worst. But a soft whine finally coaxes me to open my eyes. The black wolf lies down in front of me, his warm tongue licking at my cheek.

He won. Somehow. I shut my eyes again as Cody shifts back. There's a rustling sound as he puts his clothes back on.

"Simon," Cody says. A gentle hand pulls the rag out of my mouth. "You okay man?"

Before I can stop it, a sob wracks through me and I squeeze my eyes shut. Cody's arms reach under my back and knees before lifting me up, cradling me to his chest as I cry and shake.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I'm so fucking sorry."

I just want to escape it all.

Chapter 6

Cody

I sit on the edge of my bed, hunched down with my hands clasped together, watching the tiny omega curled up in the bed across from me. I meet his eyes several times, but he just stares blankly ahead, unseeing. I drape a blanket over him, hand brushing over his shoulder, trying not to let it hurt when he flinches away from me.

Because damn, it hurts more than I would have thought.

Even though I completely and utterly deserve it.

But I don't know what to do. I'm not exactly good at comforting. I'm not good at having heart to heart conversations. Hell, I'm not used to having to put someone else's needs before my own. Growing up privileged, there was never anything or anyone to worry about.

When I heard his cries, something inside me ripped open. The need to protect my omega was so overwhelming that those men never stood a chance against me. By the time I was done, one of them was clutching his splintered arm and the other two had to drag their leader away. I'm not sure if he's alive or not, but I really don't care.

The only thing that matters now is Simon.

Yet I'm at a loss as to how make this up to him. There's a part of me, just below the surface, trying to justify what I did. But the excuses are piss poor and the voice is weak. It whispers that it would be so much easier if he just did what I wanted. Isn't that what omegas are for? Dad always told me that omegas are there to be used. That they love nothing ,more than to be fucked and owned and pop out heirs.

My omega father certainly never complained when Dad had his way with him.

Of course if he did...

My fingers grip my hair tightly. I can blame it on the bond all I want, but I should never have been drinking when I was so on edge.

The rage of being turned down by an omega was overwhelming. No omega's ever turned me down before. My wrist still aches from where Simon bit me, and anger once again begins to

bubble in my chest until Simon's tear-stained face flashes before my eyes.

I've never been scared of myself before. I never knew I was capable of anger like that. Capable of hurting someone who can't defend himself. Of ripping men apart without a second thought.

Letting out a quiet sigh, I turn the lamp off and lay back on top of my own bed, but sleep doesn't come easy. I drift in and out all night, trying to ignore the whimpers and muffled sobs from the boy next to me.

He still hasn't said a word.

He hasn't even opened his eyes. He just lies on the bed where I left him. A plate of toast sits cold and untouched next to him.

More desperate than ever, I resume searching through the small library I've acquired, but it's obvious that I suck at this. I can barely concentrate on anything with the comatose omega just a few feet away.

The first thing I did when I woke up, was dump every drink I bought down the kitchen sink. I thought it would have been harder, but even just touching the bottle of malt sent bile crawling up my throat.

Last night can't happen again.

I close the book, exasperated. I don't know what to do. My cock throbs and aches. Simon is unresponsive. I can't figure out how to break the bond on my own. Everything is spiraling out of control and I can't-

Clamping a hand over my mouth, I try to muffle the sob that wants to break free. The room is suddenly suffocating. I pull my knees up to my chest, trying to control my quaking shoulders. I'm so far out of my depth and this is all too much.

The sobs wrack through me, to my shame. Alphas don't cry. Dad would smack me over the head if he could see me now, curled up on the floor like toddler. I start to get angry again, only this time it's at myself. My fists clench and I want to growl and roar and break things.

But at the same time, I just don't have the energy to get up off the floor. It's like there are weights pinning me down and all of my energy is gone. Like even the most basic actions will leave me exhausted. All I can do is bury my face in my knees and get lost in the feeling of helplessness.

Is this what Simon feels like?

For the first time in a long time, I want my omega father to walk through the door. Because he'll know how to fix everything. He won't get mad at me for crying and sniveling. Just hand me a tissue

and rub my back until I calm down.

There was a time in my life when he was Dad. When I was really little and demanded to be held and coddled. I don't know quite when that changed, but now I wish I was four years old again and he was rocking me to sleep.

I can almost feel his hand rubbing circles on my back, and lean into the touch. Another hand squeezes my shoulder. Slowly, my body relaxes under the gentle touch. The shaking stops, and my breathing evens out.

My eyes ache as I open them to big green, concerned-filled eyes. I didn't even hear him get up.

He doesn't say anything, just keeps rubbing my back. I search his face for any sign of fear or distrust, but find none. Only a weary sadness and more compassion than I deserve. I look up, confused and exhausted.

"I'm sorry."

He just gives me a tired, pained smile. "You didn't do it on purpose."

I come undone. Before I can stop myself, I wrap my arms around him and pull him into my chest, burying my face in his soft hair. He lets out a surprised gasp, instinctively resisting, but I just squeeze tighter.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm so fucking sorry."

Simon

Things are different now. Cody's different now. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not.

As annoying as he was, always drinking and shoving his joint at me and whining about research, I'm not sure how to feel about this change. All the alcohol is gone. He just sits and works with me. There's no more complaints or smartass remarks. He goes outside to smoke now.

But it's awkward. The silence in the motel room is tense and uncomfortable. The bond tugs harder with every passing hour. Cody barely looks at me, and when he does its with this gentle smile, like he's afraid that I'll fall apart if he breathes too hard around me.

I am touched. I really am. But a part of me wants to go back to before. I don't like the idea of anyone trying to change themselves for me.

Maybe I should give in and let him fuck me. The thought makes my heart soar and my body hot, but then I shiver and my heart refuses to slow down and I can't catch my breath. Everything is so fucked up and confusing now.

The hug... I can still feel his strong arms around me, smothering, yet safe. Nothing sexual or aggressive about it. Just a desperate need for comfort and forgiveness. For just a second, I almost panicked. Strange men holding me down, hands pawing at my jeans and chest. But it was gone as quickly as it came when Cody was crying his eyes out into my hair.

Suddenly Cody wasn't an alpha who towered over me, ordering me around, expecting me to be an obedient little omega. For a moment, he was just a person, as hurt and broken as I am.

But then Cody let go and disappeared into the bathroom. Now I don't know where we stand with each other.

We went to bed without a word to each other and I try not to think about the day I wasted with my issues. Then we wake up and ignore the metaphorical ticking clock, because the one on the wall is lying in the corner, ripped clean in half.

So we sit and read and take notes and try to ignore each other's scent. There's a list in one of the potions books about ingredients and their uses. Several herbs are used to dilute and separate and write down each one.

One of the spellbooks has a couple banishing spells that I bookmark.

Maybe we have to look at the bond as it's own entity. Separate from ourselves. If I look at it that way, I might have better luck. I look over Cody's notes and can't help but cringe slightly. He's trying, but dear God he's bad at this.

Cody must have seen my raised eyebrow because he snatches his notebook back, giving me a glare.

"Well at least you can actually read mine," he snarks and for a second, it's as if none of this ever happened.

But immediately he shuts down, looking away. I wonder if this is going to be how it is from now on. Just a series of moments where Cody is his old self again, before he remembers and this docile, polite creature is back in his place.

I sigh and rub my forehead. We can't keep going on like this. His face, feral and dangerous, flashes in front of me, but I try to shake it away. I need to get us back on track.

"It's not my fault you never learned to read handwriting," I grin at him, praying he takes the bait.

He does. I can almost see feathers bristling. "I can read it just fine. You look like you're writing with your left hand."

I raise an eyebrow. "I do write with my left hand. I'm left-handed."

Cody glares again and I grin back. This is good. This is light and fun and I'm determined to keep it going. For once his sarcasm and

teasing doesn't bother me in the least.

"Fine, then you look like you write with your right hand."

It's such a weak comeback that I can't help but laugh. He growls at me to shut up but I just laugh harder. "Seriously, it's not that funny!" But I'm too far gone.

"Fine, you want something to laugh about?" His voice is almost threatening, but there's laughter in his eyes now.

I shriek as he scoops me up and dumps me on the bed. For just a second, I almost panic. But then the hands holding me down are on my belly and under my arm and it takes me a second to realize what he's doing.

"Are you kidding me?" I gasp.

Tickling. He's fucking tickling me. I squirm and gasp in between laughter, face turning red. "Oh God! Stop! Please!"

"You wanna laugh?" He grins. "Laugh bitch!"

I howl and thrash, but he hardly notices. Tears run down my face as his hand moves up to my neck and I find myself doing a rather impressive impression of a turtle. His fingers pry in anyways and I scream.

And then my teeth clamp down on his hand.

He freezes, mouth hanging open slightly. Icy fear creeps up my spine, but my jaw is locked and I can't let go.

I didn't mean to! I swear I didn't mean to!

But then he grins again, gently tugging his hand out of my mouth and rolling off me so that we're lying face to face. He inspects the damage and to my utter relief, I see that I didn't even break skin.

"Sorry," I mumble.

He just smiles and looks more relaxed and happy than I've seen in a while. My heart flutters as I really look at him. His black bangs hang in his dark blue eyes, flecked with yellow, reminding me of a starry night. His strong jaw is set in a grin and before I can stop myself, I reach out and run my thumb over his cheek. But then the smile is gone, replaced with a deep sadness. I nearly yank back my hand.

"Sorry," I mutter. "I-"

"Why did you forgive me?" he asks.

"What?" I stare at him.

Those beautiful eyes close and his face scrunches up like he's in pain. "After what I nearly did to you...why are you acting like this? Like everything is fine?"

He covers his eyes with his hand and takes a shaky breath. My heart aches for him. For us. I reach out again and rest my hand on his cheek.

"Everything I read about bonds," I start quietly, "they say that

it's nearly impossible to stop. You'd been trying so hard and you were upset and drunk and I get it."

"I acted like an animal," h whispers. "That wasn't me."

"I know," I say earnestly. "Honestly you've been better than most alphas would be in this situation. You've been...amazing."

That doesn't seem to help. He growls, low and pained. "You were so surprised when I refused to kill you. That's sick, you know? That you think I would."

"Most alphas would," I whisper.

"I don't want to be like most alphas."

"I know." I'm suddenly desperate for him to feel better. "You're not. God you're not at all! You stopped yourself! You came for me."

A shudder ripples through my body. "If you hadn't come after me..."

His arms are around me again, pulling me close. His scent fills my senses and I inhale deeply. "Yesterday, when you were...fuck you didn't seem to see anything. You didn't even twitch. You were just empty, and I was so fucking angry because I made you like that. I never want to see you like that again."

This time I'm the one who starts crying. Cody holds me tighter and I want to tell him how I'm not angry at him. I want to tell him how I completely forgive him and how grateful I am that he cared enough to come after me. But the words get lost somewhere.

So I cling to him just as tightly instead, curling into his rock hard chest until my eyes dry up and my body stills. His fingers card through my hair and I feel my eyelids drooping. We lay awake a little while longer, content to remain tangled up in each other...

I jolt awake to the sound of someone knocking on our door. Cody nearly snarls and his arms tighten around me. "It's three in the morning, they can come back later."

It doesn't stop though. If anything, whoever is at the door seems to be getting more frantic.

"Some fucking drunk got the wrong door," Cody grumps.

"Can you just get it already?" I beg.

Cody snarls again as he pulls himself up. I close my eyes and try not to snicker as I hear him knock over a pile of books. He fumbles with the lock for a moment before I finally hear the door swing open.

"Buddy I think you got the wrong roo..." He trails off and I raise my head, blinking in confusion.

"Simon...it's for you."

Chapter 7

Simon

A split lip, left eye swollen shut, a gash on his forehead sending a trickle of blood down the side of his face, and cradling a bent and swollen wrist. His hair is a mess, no longer held in it's usual ponytail.

"Oh God! Dallas?"

I shoot out of bed, stumbling across the room and ushering him in. His hand clutches my shoulder, gripping as if he'll never let go. Cody stands to the side, giving us room as I take his arm and lead him over to the closest bed. He sits down and I can see his shoulders shaking.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?"

Dallas shoots a concerned look at Cody.

"He's okay," I assure him.

Closing his eyes, he raises his shirt and I gasp at the purple and yellow decorating his stomach. Hesitantly, I look over at his backside. My eyes water slightly at the belt marks there. Most are red and inflamed, but there's a couple cuts from where the belt broke skin.

God he's a mess. I try to remain calm as I go to the bathroom and grab a face cloth, soaking it with warm water. Dallas doesn't move a muscle as I dab at the blood on his face, as gently as I can. His eyes are wet and I don't have to ask to know what happened.

I inspect Dallas's wrist. Thankfully I don't see any evidence of broken bones, but it looks painful. He keeps his head lowered, long brown hair covering his face. I brush it back behind his ears. The gash on his forehead won't stop bleeding and the best I can do is press a towel over it.

If he were a shifter, he could take his animal form and heal more naturally. But he's human through and through. His recovery is going to be slow and painful.

"We need to get you to a doctor," I murmur. "Do you know where this town's ER is?"

After a moment, Dallas nods. I look over at Cody. He answers my silent question with a nod. I help him stand up, uneasy at how pliable he is. To my surprise, Cody grabs his jacket from off the floor and hands to to me. I wrap it over Dallas's shoulders. He leans into me as I wrap an arm around his shoulder.

Cody doesn't say a word the whole time, his face a hard mask. I wonder if he's annoyed by all of this, but I can't bring myself to care at the moment because Dallas is shaking like a leaf and clutching my hand like a lifeline.

The doctor that looks him over is an alpha and Dallas leans into me, eyes squeezed shut. Doctor Bernard just smiles kindly and keeps his voice low. I wonder if this is a common night for him. He doesn't even bat an eye when Dallas flinches away when he touches his wrist.

"It's just a sprain," he says and I breathe a sigh of relief. "I'm going to wrap it now. Alright?"

I give Dallas what I hope is an encouraging smile. He swallows hard and nods, trembling slightly as the doctor slips his hand and wrist into the black brace. He then pulls out a little prescription pad.

"These will help with the pain."

I take it from him when Dallas won't even look up and let Dallas lean against me as we step back out into the waiting room. Cody stands up and takes the prescription from me with a nod. I smile gratefully as he heads over to the pharmacy as we go back to the car.

Dallas rests his head on my shoulder and I run my fingers through his hair. I don't know what's going to happen next, but I want him to know that I'm there for him. Like it's my duty to help a fellow omega.

Cody hasn't said more than two words though, and now that we're heading back to the motel, I let myself worry. I never told him about Dallas and I wonder how angry he'll be that I brought this unnecessary trouble on us.

Things were finally starting to go well too.

But Cody pushes a glass of water and two pills into Dallas's hands almost as soon as we walk through the door. Dallas whispers a thank you before downing them. Cody nods and hesitates before gently patting his head and I feel a surge of affection for the alpha.

Exhausted, I help Dallas pull his shirt and pants off, leaving him in his boxers. His eyes flick to the couch but I pull him over to my bed. Quickly, I undress and take my wolf form. Dallas's eyes widen as I climb up onto the bed with him. I tenderly lick his face and a shadow of delight crosses his features as I curl up beside him. He drapes his good arm over my body and buries his face into my fur.

Cody looks stony, but the corner of his lip quirks in response, letting me know that it's okay, before pulling his jacket back on and walking out the door, locking it behind him. My eyes widen. If he's going where I think he is...

Dallas rolls over and rests his head on my chest. Brown eyes look up me, shining with gratitude.

"Thank you," he whispers.

Cody

If I don't calm down, I'm going to break the steering wheel.

At first I thought I was angry at Simon. A heads up that he had opened up our room as shelter for another omega would have been nice. Because trying to fade into the background while Simon fussed over another alpha's omega was a little jarring.

But then I was sitting in the hospital waiting room and all I could see was the same hollow expression and empty eyes, just on a different face, and my fists clenched so tightly that the man sitting next to me moved over a couple seats.

Disturbed. I'm very disturbed by this whole mess.

Because it was scary how Simon jumped into action, cleaning and disinfecting and inspecting. He knew just what to do, and what to say to calm his friend down. I picture him standing in a bathroom going through these motions, except he's looking in a mirror and he's the one with the black eye.

The thought makes my blood boil.

Even worse is how he didn't look surprised. Horrified, upset, but not shocked. He took one look at the alpha at the bookstore and knew that Dallas would need help sooner or later, when the thought never crossed my mind.

The dinky little store comes into view and I'm viewing the world through a red haze. I think about the two little omegas, both abused by their alphas, curled up together, finding comfort in each other.

"Learn your place, omega!"

Those words made sense a short time ago. When the world was simple. When an omega's highest purpose was to satisfy their alpha. When being an alpha was a source of pride and power.

"Who the hell do you think you are, omega?"

Those words seem utterly vile now.

I feel strangely detached as I walk up the steps. The door creaks open and my eyes narrow on the greasy alpha who's currently nursing a bottle of whiskey. He glares up at me as I walk in.

"We're closed."

It's a far cry from the last time I was in here. My knuckles crack. "Where's your cashier?"

"Little shit disappeared on me," he growls. "Swear to God when he shows his face again..."

A bear shifter, no doubt about it. My hands curl into fists. There's nothing worse than a bear with a temper. I suppress a snarl.

Someone like him had no business mating with a human.

I'd originally planned to antagonize him first, make things nice and slow. So I feel slightly disappointed when my fist flies out, connecting with the alpha's jaw. There's a sickening crack as he flies backward, stumbling into the shelf behind him. With a predatory snarl, he lunges at me, and the counter scrapes as he knocks it to the side.

He's bigger than me, maybe stronger, but he's fat and it's clearly been a while because his punches are sloppy and I dodge them easily. He won't shift in the store either. He cares too much about his precious merchandise. The most he lands is a glancing blow below my ear. It's over within a minute and the bastard is panting in a heap on the floor.

"What the hell do you want?" he tries to growl but it comes out more like a whine.

I lean in close and wait for him to notice. It takes an embarrassingly long time, but when he does, I can't keep the smirk off my face.

"Dallas," he does growl this time, taking a deep inhale. "What the fuck did you-"

My foot shoots out. He coughs, clutching his stomach.

"I took him to the emergency room," I hiss. "He came out with a brace. I paid for the oxycodone the doctor gave him for the pain."

Shame flits across his face before he's on the defense.

"He had it coming!" he insists. "I was just punishing him!"

The conviction in his voice makes me sick. Dad told me that sometimes alphas had to discipline their omegas. I'd and accepted it as appropriate and necessary. I'd never witnessed my own mentality until now though. It's different when you watch your omega patching up his broken friend.

I effortlessly haul him up and pin him against the wall.

"Listen to me very closely," I snarl. "You ever so much as put a scratch on him again, I will come after you and no court will convict me. We clear?"

He actually looks terrified as he nods. I let go and he sinks to the floor in a heap.

My anger's still not quite satiated as I storm out, slamming the door behind me. During the drive back to the motel I hum, trying to will myself to calm down at least a bit. No need to frighten Dallas more.

Quietly, I slip through the door and take a seat at the small kitchen table. Simon and Dallas are tangled up in each other, sleeping peacefully. I try to extinguish the spark of jealousy that flares up. There's nothing to be jealous about.

Except that they understand each other almost instantly. They have a connection that an alpha can't be a part of. I wonder if all omegas are like this. Connected to each other, ready to drop everything for each other.

Or maybe Simon is just a saint.

The book on omega history catches my eye from the massive pile of books. Quietly, I grab it off the floor and resume my spot at the table. I don't know what exactly I'm expecting, but I realized tonight that I really don't know anything at all about the boy I'm bonded to.

I skip the introduction because fuck that, and begin to read.

Simon

It's 1:48pm when my eyes blink open. I try to sit up but quickly become aware of the warm body pressed up against me and still myself. Dallas's head rests on my neck, long hair tickling my nose. As my vision clears, I notice Cody hunched over the kitchen table. Gently, I extract myself from Dallas's grip. I shift back and pull my jeans on.

"Morning," I say softly.

Cody looks up and my forehead creases with worry. He looks terrible. There are dark circles under bloodshot eyes and I realize I never saw him go to bed last night. Then I notice the book clenched in his hands.

A History of Omegas. My eyes widen. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

He laughs, his voice low and raspy, before shaking his head. Carefully, I slide out from underneath Dallas. Thankfully he's still completely out and doesn't even stir at the movement. I sit down at the table across from Cody.

"Why are you reading that?"

He shoves the book in my face. The chapter he's on details the era when omegas were bought and sold as slaves just under a hundred years ago. "Tell me it's lying," he begs.

I shrug helplessly. Its not exactly something people talk about or teach in school so I'm not surprised that Cody had no idea. He drops the book and buries his face in his hands. "God. How can you even stand to be around me?"

"Not this again," I sigh, but I smile at him. "If it wasn't clear enough before I'll say it again. Yes, you hurt me. Yes, it was horrible and terrifying and it really fucking hurt."

He winces and bows his head. I reach over and grab his hand. "But you stopped. You realized you'd gone too far. You came for me. You've been bending over backwards ever since to make it up to me.

You can't even begin to understand how much that means to me."

Cody finally smiles weakly. His eyes flick over to Dallas. "Dad always told me that omegas were for us. Like objects or something. A good omega is meant to obey and please us. I believed it because I had nothing else to go on. My omega father..."

He squeezes his eyes shut. "He always cared for me when I was younger and I called him Da. Played with me, taught me about music, and God I was a little shit to him. It was always about what I wanted. I can't even count the times I told him I hated him because he wouldn't do what I said. Dad always encouraged it too. I'd see him treat Father worse than his dog, and just assumed it was right."

"You didn't know," I say softly. "You had nothing else to go on."

He shakes his head. "I should have. I should have figured it out a lot sooner."

I wonder if there's anything I can say that'll get through to him. I squeeze his hand tighter. "Well you know what we go through now. That already makes you better than most."

Cody's quiet for a moment, then looks up. His eyes are slightly wet. "You think my omega father will forgive me?"

I nod encouragingly. "I don't doubt it for a second."

Chapter 8

Cody

"I don't think I can handle going back right now," Dallas says over a dinner of microwave pizza. "I know that the bond will start to affect me, but I think I'm okay with that."

Dallas didn't wake up until around six. The first thing he did was down his painkillers, then Simon insisted on helping him clean the marks that littered his body. Simon will definitely make a pretty little wife one day.

I ignore how the thought makes my heart ache slightly.

Simon nods. "You're welcome to stay here you know."

"Thanks, but I don't want to bring him down on you guys."

"Trust me, I can take that sack of lard any day," I say. "You're safe here."

Dallas looks at me gratefully. "I appreciate it, but you guys have enough on your plate." Simon looks like he's about to protest, but he waves a hand. "You're looking for a way to break your bond right?

Just...maybe let me know when you succeed."

"If we succeed," Simon mutters.

"You will," Dallas says confidently.

"So where will you go then?" I ask.

"I'm thinking of heading to my Mom's. She's an alpha. Never bonded either. I'll hop a bus tomorrow morning."

Simon looks worried, and I know why. He went outside on his own once and bad shit went down. The idea of his friend wandering off on his own is probably terrifying. He'll worry himself silly until Dallas calls to confirm that he made it safely.

"I can drive you," I offer. "We could even leave tonight if you want." I tell myself that we're running out of time and we don't need anymore distractions. It's not because I don't want to see Simon upset.

"That's..." He sounds like he's about to say no, before giving me a weary smile. "That would be great. Thank you."

But my gaze is on Simon, who's looking at me like I just made the sun shine again and I can't help but feel rather satisfied that I made him happy. Once again I'm filled with the burning need to take him, but I push it back. Now's not the time.

Frog Lake is only about two hours away. I load up the car with chips, cookies and energy drinks. Simon decides to stay behind and continue with our research. Dallas and Simon hug and Dallas kisses Simon on the cheek. I narrow my eyes and pretend that that doesn't bother me just a little. I can't forget what we're trying to do. Getting too emotionally attached is not what we need right now.

But damn I'd be lying if I denied the tiny part of me that almost wishes we fail, inheritance be damned.

The drive is mostly silent. Dallas keeps shooting me looks that I can't quite decipher. Awe or attraction maybe? Though maybe that's just my ego. I hum to the radio and tap my fingers against the dashboard.

"I never meant to get bonded to Brett," Dallas says suddenly.

"No?" I bite my lip, not sure why he's telling me this.

"Simon told me about you guys. It was kind of like that. I haven't been nearly as lucky as Simon though."

Nope, I want to say, and my grip tightens slightly. I really do not need another appreciation-induced guilt trip. "He hasn't been that lucky," I mutter.

But Dallas looks at me with that damn grateful smile. "He is. You haven't hurt him or forced him into anything! That's just...the bond can't be easy on you."

Bile rises in my throat. I wish I was worthy of this. I could keep silent and let him continue believing what he says, but the guilt won't let me. "You're wrong. I hurt him bad. Two days ago. I lost

control. I chased him off. He almost..." I shudder, not wanting to think about it.

I look back over, expecting disappointment or maybe even a bit of fear, but there's only sympathy. "He told me. He told me that you stopped and that you rescued him and that you've been perfectly lovely to him ever since."

"But I still hurt him," I say. Why doesn't anyone understand that? "I hurt him and that doesn't just go away because I'm nicer to him afterward! God, are all you omegas like this?"

I know I'm getting angry now, but I'm sick of these weak justifications. "Just because someone feels bad afterward doesn't magically make everything better! You act like I'm some kind of hero just because I didn't fucking rape him!"

Dallas flinches back slightly, but doesn't withdraw. He squeezes my shoulder. "Us omegas...we kind of have to take whatever kindness we can get you know? It might not seem like much to you, but to Simon and me, it means the world."

"It shouldn't," I protest. "You deserve better than that."

"Probably," Dallas shrugs. "But the world doesn't work like that."

"Not yet," I add.

And that starry eyed look is back, like I'm some kind of messiah and just adds to to the unease I feel. Because I don't deserve his admiration. I don't deserve to have these beautiful creatures looking at me like I'm the only good thing in their sad little lives.

The thought that I might be just that... I glance at my passenger again. He's humming along to the radio, looking peaceful and content. I silently promise to both him and Simon, that I'll make myself worth their admiration.

Whatever it takes.

Simon

There are theories that if the alpha and omega ignore the bond for long enough, it'll disappear on it's own. I can't find any examples of that being true though.

I've never had the luxury of a laptop before. Whenever I wanted to go online, the library was the only place available to me, and only for an hour. I almost feel like I'm discovering a new world as I look through forums and chat rooms. Nearly every newspaper article written in the last sixty years is on here. I almost squeal out loud when I find out what an ebook is. Having hundreds of books on me at all times...that's a dream come true right there.

I shut it off though, when I realize I've been reading

information about various dog breeds for the last half hour. We can't afford any distractions. It's Wednesday evening. Sunday's looming closer and I need to keep myself focused.

But I've found quite a few rituals on blood binding, and a few more on various repellents used by omegas to keep alphas away during heat. If those could somehow be combined. Maybe a reverse blood binding? Maybe a binding ritual, but instead of the usual ingredients, I could use components for the repellents? There's always the risk of the spell going wrong. And I've heard of spells going wrong in the strangest ways too. For all I know I could end up turning us into cows.

Maybe there might be a way to transfer the bond? Though who I'd transfer it to is a whole new issue. Maybe Cody's wife to be could help us? But then we'd have to drag her into this mess and I don't like that idea. She doesn't need to know that her fiance is a man whore.

Looking over my notes again, I go back to the reverse blood binding and repellents. I wonder if I could somehow test a few ideas on something. Goldfish perhaps? But the thought of accidentally hurting an innocent little fish scraps that idea almost instantly. I wonder if plants can bond with each other.

The image of two plants crying out as their bond is destroyed flashes through my mind and I bury my face in my hands. I'll take that disturbing image as proof of my sanity slowly slipping away.

And now Dallas is counting on me to figure this out so that he doesn't have to go back to that pig of an alpha. My heart starts pounding at the thought of letting him down and my brain immediately starts to scramble for straws to grasp onto. With a sigh I set my notebook down and flop onto my bed.

I need a break. This is getting me nowhere.

Closing my eyes, I take deep breaths in an attempt to relax and clear my mind. But the clock is ticking and there's so much at stake, and now I'm alone without Cody's obnoxious grin to keep me grounded. I feel like I'm caught in a storm with no light or lifeboat. Just endless chaos and confusion.

Then the phone rings and I almost start crying.

It's been almost two hours since Cody and Dallas left. They should be at Frog Lake soon assuming Cody kept to the speed limit. The thought almost makes me laugh. I scramble off the bed and nearly knock the phone off the table in my attempt to grab it.

"Hello?"

"Hey," Dallas says. "I just thought I'd let you know I'm here. Cody's on his way back now."

"Good." I can't stop the grin. "How was the ride?"

There's a pause. "Good. That alpha of yours is something else

though."

"He didn't give you any trouble, did he?" I ask worriedly.

"Not at all. He gives himself plenty of trouble though." Dallas's tone almost sounds sad.

"Huh?"

"He doesn't know how to forgive himself. He's upset that you forgave him."

I sigh. "I thought we'd been over this."

Dallas chuckles. "Yeah. But he's not quite over it. You found quite the alpha, you know."

"Yeah," I say softly. "I did, didn't I? I'll call you soon. Okay?"

"Sounds good. Cody's got my number for you."

I sit back down on the bed and try not to think about the ache in my chest. I'm getting close to the spell we need, I can feel it. But if I'm honest with myself, its getting harder and harder to give it my all.

Looking around at the crappy little motel room, littered with books and paper and still faintly smelling of weed, I realize I don't want this to end. I want to stay in this private little world that we've constructed for ourselves, consequences be damned.

I picked a good one. A little rough and a lot more chaotic than I might have wanted, but ultimately with a surprisingly gentle side. One I like to think is only for me.

My hand makes it's way down between my legs and slides into my jeans as I think of those beautiful blue eyes. The ache inside me has been itching away for a while. But only now that things have calmed down and I have a moment to myself do I really feel the need taking hold.

Stroking my cock, I lie back and go over every detail I can remember of that night in the bar. The way he bent me over in his car, holding me down and fucking me into sweet oblivion. I want that again. I'm ready now.

For the next hour and a half, I lie naked on the bed, picturing Cody's huge cock ramming itself into my hole. I glance at the clock as I rub myself, always slowing down before I come. It's torture, this waiting game.

Finally, after forever, the door clicks open and Cody steps through the door. His black hair is ruffled and he looks tired. But then he catches sight of me in all my glory and his eyes darken.

"You sure?" Is all he asks, his voice is low.

I nod, still gripping my cock. I stare into his eyes and give it a slow stroke. A white bead of precum runs down my fingers and that's all it takes to undo him.

With an animalistic growl, he grabs me by the arms and drags me up to the middle of the bed. I barely get a breath in before his lips

are crashing into mine, tongue plunging hungrily in my mouth. I lick at him, desperately taking in his salty sweet taste.

"Fuck, Simon," he growls, kneeling over me. He pulls away and yanks his shirt off, exposing a rock hard six pack. I reach out and grab for his zipper, fumbling with it before yanking his jeans down, which quickly join his shirt on the floor. His rock hard cock bobs close to my face. I can practically feel the heat radiating off of it.

A strong hand tangles in my hair, pulling me closer. I look up into his eyes, holding his gaze as I take the tip into my mouth. He bucks slightly as I suck and run my tongue along the shaft, before slowly moving my lips down his length. I don't stop until I feel the tip poke the back of my throat. I gag and choke slightly but that just makes Cody groan. My head bobs as I slide in and out, feeling his cock flex and twitch.

My hand pumps my own cock harder as Cody thrusts into my mouth, hand pulling tightly on my hair. My pleasure comes from his pleasure and I feel the deep-rooted need to please my alpha. Precum and drool dribble down my chin. His width stretches my lips and rubs them raw.

Suddenly with a final thrust, Cody pulls out completely. Quickly and smoothly he flips me onto my stomach on the bed. His hands spread my cheeks apart, exposing my open, dripping hole. I grab the bars of the bed frame, ass clenching in anticipation. Two wet fingers shove inside me quickly and roughly and I gasp at the jolt of pleasure as he stretches me open. I push back against his hand and he chuckles.

"Needy little omega."

"Fuck me," I whine. "Fuck me as hard as you can!"

His fingers retreat and I whimper at the emptiness it leaves me. But then his hands grab my hips and his cock plunges inside of me hard and fast. I cry out at the searing heat. He grabs my wrists and yanks my arms behind me, pinning them to my back. The feeling of helplessness overtakes me but this time it's welcomed and I shudder and squirm beneath him.

I moan and raise my ass as high as I can as Cody's hips grind into me. I clench my hole and Cody gasps and rocks harder, pressing me deep into the mattress. My hard cock rubs against the soft sheets and I can feel the growing wet spot.

His breathing grows more and more erratic. His hips slap hard against my ass. With a howl and a groan, his seed pumps into me, filling my hole and dripping down my thighs. He gives several softer pumps before pulling out, and fuck, I'm so close!

Then a hand comes down, hard and unexpected against my wet ass, making me yelp as I desperately hump the mattress. The pain

feels strangely good and my cock stiffens and my balls draw up.

One more hard spank, right on my stretched hole is all it takes before I spill into the mattress.

Chapter 9

Cody

"I think I've almost got it," Simon tells me.

I look up from my laptop. "Yeah?"

"It'll be a bit risky. I'm combining a spell and a ritual and changing ingredients around a bit," he says nervously. "But even if it doesn't work, I don't think it'll be too dangerous."

"That's reassuring."

It's Thursday afternoon now. Neither of us have mentioned the previous night and I'd be lying if I said things weren't awkward. Simon has the plug firmly back in place and has barely said a word to me all morning. Just played on his laptop and scribbled in his notebook, barely looking up. My attempts at conversation left me feeling like I'd have more luck with the plastic plant on the table.

"So what do we do?" I ask.

"Honesty, I'm really not sure it'll work," he admits. "I found an old binding spell right?"

"Sounds counterproductive," I say dryly.

"Yeah...basically I've looked up all of the ingredients for it. Red carnations, basil, rose hips, and clove oil are made into a tea. Sage of course is burned. We mix our blood together into the tea, say the spell and drink at the same time."

"And this is supposed to help us how?"

Simon waves a hand. "I'm getting to that. Now I found a spell on repelling. You need a bit of the person or creature you want to repel. Burn it, and say the chant."

"Would that work on mosquitoes?"

"Probably."

"Sweet."

"Anyway, I looked up the Latin translation of the binding chant and it's pretty basic stuff. I've been working on altering it to combine it with the repellent spell. They both have similar core words. As long as those are left in, it should work."

"So you just reversed a ritual?" I raise an eyebrow. "That sounds rather...easy."

"Yeah," he sighs. "But it's all I got."

"So what about the tea?"

Simon bites his lip. "Well the rose hips have to stay, but I replaced the clove oil and basil with nettle and amaranth, and instead of red carnations, we use striped ones."

"Uh huh." I'm not even going to pretend I understand any of this, but I'm also not interested enough to ask either. "So you think this will work then?"

"Honestly..." His lower lip pouts out. "I'm really not sure. Nobody's ever tried something like this before as far as I know, but for all we know it could do nothing at all."

"Worth a shot though, right?" I shrug.

"Yeah I guess," he says. "I know it sounds simple, and someone's probably tried something like this anyway, but it's really all I got."

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "Well let's do this thing then."

I try to ignore the ache in my chest and tell myself that I hope it works. Maybe last night was a bad idea after all. I'm becoming far too attached. Shit, we're so far down the rabbit hole on this one.

"We'll need to track down the ingredients." Simon slides off the bed and grabs his jacket.

He seems...eager, almost. I try not to let myself feel irritated, but he's acting like last night never even happened. Like it meant nothing. He's barely looked at me all morning. I squeeze his shoulder as we head out the door, watching carefully and clench my jaw at the way he frowns.

Why in hell did he want me to fuck him, then?

Driving back to Canavan River, I sneak glances at Simon. He's resting his face against the window, staring out at the passing scenery of trees and farmland. I turn up the music, unable to deal with the silence.

The thought of the ritual weighs heavily on me. How maybe even tonight, we might wash our hands of each other. The despair that rises inside of me is almost overwhelming and I want to drive as far away from here as possible. Keep this little omega riding shotgun with me for the rest of my life.

But the omega seems to have other ideas. He must be excited to finally be rid of me. The obnoxious alpha who ruined his happy, pathetic little life. Maybe the reason he's gone so long unbonded is because I was the only one interested in his scrawny ass.

"There's an old apothecary we can check out," Simon says quietly. "We don't need anything too rare. The striped carnations will be the hardest to find."

I don't say anything, just turn the music up louder. He sighs beside me and my hands clench the steering wheel so tightly that the metal starts to bend. His eyes are on me now, staring with that annoying soul-searching look.

"Dude, cut it out," I snap.

Green eyes widen and he looks away, pink colouring his cheeks. "Sorry."

Great. Now he looks like someone kicked his puppy.

I wait in the car while he goes into the apothecary, trying to keep myself in check. He returns quickly, a paper bag clutched in his hand. A fucking hour of driving for ten minutes in a store. Simon

keeps his face turned away from me, catching onto my bad mood as we leave Canavan in the dust.

The sun is just starting to set when I pull over to the side of the road, next to an open field. I pull a joint out of the glove box and exit the car, slamming the door behind me. Pulling out my lighter, I take a seat on the hood of the car.

Simon takes a seat next to me. "What's wrong?"

I snort and roll my eyes. "What's wrong with you?"

He looks at me blankly. "Nothing. You've been weird all day."

"Is that why you wouldn't even look me in the eye?" I try to keep the hurt out of my voice and fail miserably.

For a minute, there's nothing but the sound of crickets, the Simon sighs beside me. "It was obvious huh?"

He must have noticed me stiffen before quickly continuing. "I'm sorry. I know I've been weird all day. I just...last night..."

"You regret it?" I didn't want to ask. The question has been burning inside of me all day, though I'm almost dreading the answer.

"No!" he almost shouts and I jump a bit at the desperation in his voice. "It's not like that at all! Last night was amazing and I loved every second of it! You're amazing and I don't regret any of it!"

"Then what's wrong?" I can't stop my voice from breaking slightly. "You've barely said anything to me today except to tell me about your stupid ritual! Like you just can't wait to get it done! Like you can't fucking wait to finally get rid of me!"

To my surprise his lower lip starts to wobble and that's as much warning as I get before my arms are full of trembling omega. I grunt as we end up sliding off the car and into a heap of tangled limbs on the dirt.

"I don't want this to end," he confesses, voice muffled against my chest. "I don't want to go through with it at all. I've got nothing to go back to after this."

I tighten my arms around him, trying to process this new revelation. "So the silent treatment this morning..."

"It hurts." His tears seep through my shirt. "Last night was so amazing and right that all I can think about is how it could be like this all the time. But you have your betrothal and your inheritance and it got me thinking."

His eyes are impossibly big and wet as he peers up at me. "I have nothing to offer you except myself. I couldn't look at you or talk to you because I was scared I'd end up begging you to give it all up for me. I'm not worth that."

Keeping one arm around his shoulders, I slide my other arm under his knees and pull his small body onto my lap. It's like a weight has been lifted off my chest.

"You're worth it," I murmur, holding him tightly. "You have no idea how worth it you are. I can't even believe that someone as sweet and kind as you would want a jackass like me."

"You're not," he protests. "You're strong and fun and exciting. I'm just a boring nerd."

Planting a kiss on his head I pull us up off the ground, carrying him bridal style. "Come on, lets go home."

Simon

My mind is spinning.

Cody wants me. Maybe as much as I want him.

Which in some ways just makes it worse. I remind myself that he'll lose everything if he decides to choose me. Family, money, future. No matter what he says, I know I'm not worth it in the slightest.

At the motel, I set the bag down on the table and reach for my notebook but Cody stops me.

"No," he says. "There's no hurry tonight. We deserve to have some fun."

"Like what?" I raise an eyebrow.

Cody grins and pulls the bag of green herbs out of his pocket and I snort. "Seriously? I don't do drugs."

"Come on," he whines. "It's not heroin. It won't hurt you."

"Lung cancer," I retort.

He rolls his eyes. "Name one person who's ever got lung cancer from smoking weed."

Asshole. He lays his supplies out on the bed and gets to work rolling. I flop down beside him, my stomach churning. He acts like nothing's wrong. Like we don't both know how this is going to end. I guess he just wants one last night of fun and pretending that this is going to last forever, and suddenly I know. And it makes my heart ache.

He's not going to go through with the ritual. He's going to keep putting it off for as long as he can. Because for some reason, he thinks I'm actually worth the heartache it would cause him. He'd be willing to risk being disowned, just to stay with me. I mentally kick myself. I should never have told him how I feel about him. I only encouraged his feelings, and I've made it that much harder when tomorrow comes.

I jump slightly when music starts playing on the cheap motel radio. I recognize the indie station immediately. With a carefree grin, Cody lights up the tip of the joint and hands it to me. I smile weakly and take a deep breath. He snickers when I cough slightly. Flipping him the bird, I take another toke, trying not to wince as the smoke

sears my throat.

Eyes watering, I hand it back to him. He ruffles my hair and flops back, face relaxed, like he's completely satisfied with his life. I lie down beside him and wrap an arm around his chest, pulling him close to me. He stills for a second, before his arm wraps around my waist. This is as close to heaven as I'm ever going to get, and the despair threatens to swallow me whole.

Tomorrow we do the ritual. No excuses. No putting it off. I won't be the one to ruin his life. Cody isn't thinking about what's best for him. He's only thinking about his current desires. He's somehow tricked himself into believing he could fall in love with something as pathetic as me, when I know there are omegas with so much more to offer.

Dropping the roach into the ashtray, Cody rolls over, pressing me against the bed. I stare into his dark eyes, full of need. My ass opens immediately, wetting with anticipation. My brain says that enough is enough. That I should push him away and get some sleep. But my body is flushed and red and I moan when two large fingers slip deep inside me.

This is love. This is more than I ever could have hoped for in my life, and for just a moment, I want to forget that it'll be over tomorrow. I gently take his cock in my hand and stroke the base, shuddering in delight as his hand moves inside of me.

Cody smiles at me and he's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen in my life. I stretch up toward him and he meets me halfway, covering my mouth with his. I take advantage and plunge hungrily inside of him, licking at him, desperately trying to bring his taste inside of me. His free hand tangles in my hair, holding my head up and pressing our foreheads together. I whine as he pulls away, but then his lips are moving along my neck, nipping and biting.

There's a branch of folklore that says that we descended from wolves. I'd never really believed it before, but something deep inside me screams for my lover, my *mate*, and I feel like I could believe anything.

Cody's dick is rock hard now, the tip deep red and weeping. He pulls his fingers away, slick and shining. Slowly, he lines his tip with my hole and gently pushes in. I moan and whimper, wanting to beg him to just fuck me, but I'm rendered mute when he pushes his fingers inside of my mouth. I give a needy moan and suck at the digits, teeth scraping the skin. My legs lock around his waist as he thrusts gently.

This slow build and gentle touching makes me feel like I'm having sex for the first time again. Cody's eyelids droop and his face smooths out. A light sheen of sweat coats him. The music lulls us into a trance of loving touches and smooth friction.

Then something new happens. Something that makes me gasp and buck against the man on top of me. The heat inside me grows hotter, scalding, making me squirm. My hole, wide and accommodating, suddenly feels too tight. There's an incredible pressure growing inside me, stretching me beyond anything I thought possible. I know what this is, somewhere in my scattered mind, but the word dances just out of reach.

Cody feels it too. His hands dig into my arms and his spine arches. When he opens his eyes, there's black with only the faintest ring of blue around them. My own back arches off the bed and I cry out as I realize what's happening. His cock is swelling. Growing inside me, pushing against me with such unbearable force. My fists clench against the sheets as I jerk and spasm and clench. Cody's making gasping and growling noises and thrusting so hard I feel like I'm about to split in two. Pain and pleasure combining to create a force so intense that I can barely stand it.

The orgasm hits me with all the force of a cannonball. My eyes roll back and I'm lost in blinding white light.

Chapter 10

Simon

The whistling of the kettle pierces through my head like a jackhammer. I sit on the edge of the bed, eyes tightly closed, fists clenching the blanket. Cody is in the shower. He's been there for almost an hour now. Wasting time, procrastinating as much as he can.

I want to burn the small paper bag on the counter. My notes too. I want all of the evidence of my possible breakthrough gone. But I can't do that. I can't ruin Cody's life over my own selfish desires, even though I know he'd gladly give it.

My vision blurs as I pour the water into a generic white mug. Reaching into the paper bag, I pull out the flowers and stuff everything into the little infuser. My heart cracks as I drop the metal ball into the water, watching the colour begin to change. The surface ripples slightly before stilling and I can see my reflection. Red eyed and pale.

Despite the most amazing night I've ever had, I never fell asleep. Cody wrapped his arms around me, nuzzling my neck. I lay awake listening as his breathing evened out until he was dead to the world. I stared straight ahead, willing for my eyes to droop, for the pressure in my chest to ease, for the lump in my throat to go away.

But then the first tear trickled down my cheek and off the tip of my nose. I clench my jaw in an attempt to stifle my sobs. Even in his sleep, Cody must have sensed that I was upset. His arms held me tighter and his breath tickled the back of my neck.

I'd hoped by this morning that I'd have cried myself dry, but that doesn't seem to be the case. The pressure of more tears is right behind my eyes and it takes every ounce of self control I have to keep my hands from shaking.

I wonder what Mom will say when I go home. Whether she'll be angry that I left without a word? Or will she be angry that I came back? Probably the latter. Maybe I should call Dallas and ask if I can stay with him for a while.

Without Cody.

Because he'll go home to his life. Then after a while, he won't even think about me at all. He'll marry a nice omega of high standing and make beautiful little babies with her...and it'll be like we never met.

A sob forces it's way up and I curl in on myself. I can't tell him. I can't tie him down like this. I know it's wrong, that he deserves to know. But it's just as wrong to burden him with it too. I don't know what to do...

Taking a deep breath, I pull myself up and check on the tea. It's a reddish brown colour. Ready to go. The smell is bitter and sharp.

The bathroom door creaks open behind me and I frantically wipe my eyes. "It's ready," I say hoarsely.

Cody doesn't say a word as I bring the steaming cup over to the bed. He's hunched over the side of the first bed. I take on the other, facing him. His beautiful eyes have dark circles beneath them and he looks frighteningly older than before. I tell myself firmly that it's for the best.

Holding the mug in one hand, I pull the small penknife out of my pocket. We need to mix our blood for this to work. I hold it out, barely breathing as he takes it silently. I try not to wince as he makes the tiniest little cut in his finger and I ignore the urge to take the wounded skin in my mouth and lick it clean.

The bright red bead drops into the mug. We trade and I hold the knife to my own finger. I barely feel the sting of the blade, holding my finger over the mug, watching as the drop swirls and mixes in. The liquid reddens even more.

My chest tightens further and my lungs can't get enough air. I must look horrible, face pinched with pain. Cody's jaw clenches, teeth grinding together loudly. Face tight and knuckles cracking.

It's for the best.

I say the first part of the incantation, the words shaky and

forced, before taking a sip. It's even more bitter than I thought it would be and I choke slightly. I can taste Cody and myself too though, mixed together, like when we made love, and my heart cracks further.

I hold the mug out to Cody. For just a second, he doesn't look like he'll take it, just glares at the mug like it just killed his mother, before stiffly grasping the handle. He repeats the incantation before taking a sip. If it tasted horrible to him, he doesn't let it show. His expression remains stony.

Quickly, before the words disappear back down my throat, I begin the rest of the spell. Latin and Egyptian and Greek all rolling off my tongue clumsily but clearly. My chest tightens further and I almost gasp in pain. It feels like a hand has reached inside me. Fingers curling around something precious and pulling. Sweat beads on my forehead and my eyes water. Cody grunts and his body goes rigid.

Halfway through, the pain almost becomes unbearable. There's a fire in my belly, burning me to my core. I tremble and shake. The words become more and more strained. Almost there though. I just need to hold on a little more.

"Fuck this."

The words are distant and muffled, but I recognize Cody's voice, gravelly and completely wrecked. I open my eyes (did I shut my eyes?) but all I see is a blur of movement before a large, familiar hand covers my mouth, cutting off the spell. For a second, all I see is white. The fire in my stomach disappears like someone poured cool water over it and the pain rapidly fades until only the tiniest of aches remains, leaving me winded.

When my vision clears, I'm lying back on the bed, Cody's face hovering over me as he straddles my waist. His hand remains firmly over my mouth, as if he's scared that the wretched words will continue if he moves.

His bangs stick to his sweaty forehead and his eyes glisten. I try to remove his hand but it remains firm in its hold. Tears of frustration mixed with relief escape my eyes. His other hand comes up and brushes them away tenderly.

"I changed my mind," he says, voice cracking. "Fuck my inheritance, fuck my betrothal, and fuck my Father. It's not worth it. Do you hear me?"

I stare up at him, trying to protest but my words are muffled so I shake my head. It's not worth it. I'm not worth everything he stands to lose, but he almost looks angry as he gives my head a jerk.

"It's not worth it," he repeats. "I don't care what I have to do to make you understand that, but I'm telling you, nothing- NOTHING- is worth giving you up."

Then his hand is gone as he pulls himself up off the bed. I

shake my head again. "You're giving up everything," I whisper. "Everything you've ever had, for someone who has nothing to give in return."

"That's not true," Cody almost snarls. "Fuck man! That's not true at all! I've learned more about how the world works in a week with you than I've ever learned in my life!"

"A world that you're barely a part of," I say bitterly, but I regret the words the second they leave my lips because that sounded so much more awful than I meant it to.

The hurt on Cody's face makes me want to rip my own tongue out. But then the hurt disappears and his expression darkens. I shrink back, gaze dropping to my lap. "I didn't mean it like that."

Cody laughs and it's hollow. "Yeah. Whatever."

To my alarm, he grabs his coat off the kitchen chair. "Where are you going?"

"Out," he says shortly. Without a look back, he storms out, slamming the door behind him.

I stare blankly for a second, then my face crumples. I barely notice sliding off the bed to my knees as the sobs wrack my body. I don't know what to do. I hurt him. I actually hurt the man who's willing to give up everything for me.

I don't know how long I stay like that. A pathetic little heap on the floor, wishing I could disappear through it. My alpha's absence is like a hole in my soul and I want to run after him. I want to throw myself at his feet and beg for forgiveness.

So lost in my grief, I almost don't hear the door open. But I do and I spring to my feet, ready to do whatever it takes to make it up to my alpha.

But it's not Cody who steps into the room.

My veins turn to ice as the unfamiliar alpha looks around the room disdainfully. His jet black hair, peppered with gray is combed back neatly. Dark blue eyes on a weathered face fix on me. But they have none of Cody's warmth and mischief. They're like two shards of ice, cutting into me.

"Who are you?" I ask, trying to control the tremor in my voice.

"You must be the omega that's caused my family so much trouble."

Cody

I don't go anywhere really. Just drive in circles for a while, trying to ignore the stinging behind my eyes. Deep down, I know that Simon didn't mean what he said. Not in a mean way at least. He's right. We're from two different worlds. But he's wrong to think that

that should mean anything.

And I can't help but feel patronized. He's trying to make a decision for both of us because he's got it into his stupid little head that I don't know what's best for me, so he's decided to play martyr.

I'm the alpha dammit! I'll decide what's best.

Growling, I turn to head back to the motel. I already know that he doesn't want to separate anymore than I do. I just have to make him see that. I just have to convince him that I really don't care about money or social status.

The thought of another omega in my bed makes me snort. As if that will ever happen now.

The worst part though, was seeing the self loathing and deprecation in his eyes. He truly believes that he's not worth the world and that just makes me more determined than ever to show him otherwise.

As I pull into the motel parking lot, I can't explain it, but a sliver of dread crawls up my spine. I don't know where this uneasiness is coming from, but I don't like it. I learned a long time ago to listen to my instincts, and right now they're telling me that something is very wrong.

I almost sprint to the door and my heart skips a beat when I see that the door is slightly ajar.

"Simon?" I almost shout as I step into the room.

Empty. No sign of my omega anywhere. There's an odd odor in the air, like perfume or a really powerful air freshener. The beds are made and Simon's clothes are gone, leaving the heap of books and notebooks behind.

There's a piece of paper sitting on the bed and I can barely bring myself to touch it. Swallowing hard, I unfold the note. As I read, I bite my lower lip hard until I taste copper.

Dear Cody

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know you love me and I appreciate it. I really do. But I can't do this anymore. I can't be the omega you want me to be. I just want to go back to my life. You should do the same.

Simon

What the fuck? The paper crumples as my hands curl into fists. Seriously, what the fuck is this shit? A snarl escapes me and I kick the bed, sending it sideways. After everything I've done for the little shit, he has the nerve to walk away and leave me hanging?

I don't realize my fist has gone through the wall until I feel the sting on my knuckles. I lash out again, kicking the kitchen table and hurling a chair across the room. Somebody bangs on the wall with an

angry shout.

Slumping down onto the bed, I bury my head in my hands. He's gone. He's gone and I'm fucked. Why couldn't I have just sucked it up and let him finish the damn ritual? Maybe he was right. Maybe he's not worth all the frustration and heartache.

Silently, almost detached, I drop my room key onto the bed and start to walk out the door. There's nothing in the room that I can't replace, though I cast a glance back at the notebook with the spell written in it. I stare for a second, before grabbing it off the bed before slamming the door behind me. Maybe it will work with only one of us there.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Dad's calling me. Wearily, I put it up to my ear.

"Yes?"

"Are you coming home?"

"...yes."

Chapter 11

Simon

Wherever I am, it's dark. My heart pounds in my chest and my eyes water. The room they put me in is pitch black. There's nothing but a bed, a toilet, and a sink. It feels like I'm in a prison cell during a blackout.

Writing that note was the most gut wrenching moment of my life. My hands shook and I could barely make out the words through my tears. But the gun pressed to my head reminded me of what I had to lose if I refused. I was then bound and blindfolded the entire drive.

Now Cody thinks I hate him. He won't come bursting through the door to save me. I'm alone.

Sniffing, I curl up tighter on the hard mattress, trying to ignore the pain of hunger in my stomach and the freezing cold of the basement, and pray that this is all some horrible dream. That I'll wake up in bed with Cody's arms wrapped around me.

I know what's going to happen. I'd be stupid not to. Charles Adams won't stand for some street omega to be permanently mated to his son. He certainly won't stand for any low class bastards tarnishing his line.

Which is why I don't understand why I'm still alive. Why hasn't he just taken care of me yet? Why lock me up here? It's almost worst this way. The waiting. When they first threw me in here, I screamed. I kicked and pounded at the door. Tears and snot dribbling down my face. I exhausted myself quickly though, and retreated into my wolf

form, curling up on the bed and hiding my eyes under my paw. I haven't moved since.

I picture Cody picking up the note. Reading it and thinking that I just walked away from him. From us. That tears at my heart worse than the terror of knowing that I'm going to die. He deserves so much better.

Staring blankly ahead into the darkness, I feel an almost strange sense of detachment. I don't want to die, but there's no way out of this room. All I can do is sit and wait and accept that there's no getting out of this.

It almost makes me wish that Cody had just killed me when this whole mess started. Then I wouldn't have gotten to know him. I wouldn't have fallen in love with him. I wouldn't be sitting here wishing that I could just see him one last time and tell him how much he means to me.

Then the calm is gone the the terror starts again. My breath hitches and my limbs quiver and shake. I gasp and wheeze and clutch my head. My heart beats so fast that it feels like my ribs could break. I rock back and forth, soft whimpers escaping.

Eventually, minutes, hours later, my breathing evens out and I stop shaking. Once again I feel calm and almost serene, letting my mind go numb and blank. One hand drops to my side and the other presses against my stomach. He'll never know now.

The cycle continues.

Cody

When I've been away for a while, the comfort of my own bedroom is wonderful as I realize how much I missed it. My big soft bed. My computer. My surround sound system. I usually fill my jacuzzi tub and relax for hours, enjoying the pampering that comes with old money.

Now I feel like a stranger. Like I don't belong in this house of luxury and ease. My bed is too soft, and my stereo is too loud. The lights are too bright and everything is too clean and organized from the maids.

I join my fathers for dinner and the roast tastes like ash. Dad's eyes narrow.

"So how was your week?" my omega father asks.

I shrug. "Fine."

The silence is awkward. I keep my head down and stir my food around the plate. My heart cries out for my omega and I grit my teeth, the betrayal raw in my mind. I wonder where Simon is right now?

No. I refuse to waste another thought on the backstabber. He

left me! He left me to go back to whatever happy little life he had before I came along.

"So there's been a change of plans," Dad says. "The Jacksons will be coming tomorrow instead of Sunday."

My head snaps up and I stare. He can't be serious? I'm not ready for this. I'm still bonded to Simon. I can't face my bride-to-be yet. I frown, trying to keep my voice casual. "Why the change?"

"Well, little Elizabeth apparently insisted," Dad says evenly.

It's a lie. I meet Dad's eyes with what I hope is a blank look. I then look over at my Father but he doesn't meet my gaze and there's an odd expression on his face that I can't quite read.

"So I've got to bond her tomorrow then?" I ask tonelessly.

Dad's eyes narrow. "That would be expected, yes. Everything will be ready by tomorrow. I trust we won't have any more distractions?" His voice is sharp.

I have to get out of here. Away from him before he realizes I'm on the verge of panic. I can't do this right now.

"May I be excused?" I mumble.

He nods and it takes every ounce of control not to bolt from the room. I don't realize I've been holding my breath until my bedroom door clicks shut behind me. I gasp and slide to the floor, back against the door and pinch the bridge of my nose.

I'm so fucked.

Reaching down my jeans, I grasp my cock that's been limp since yesterday and stroke it furiously. Nothing. I don't expect to get even remotely hard but there isn't even a twinge. How am I supposed to face Elizabeth tomorrow like this? I can't even pretend to bond with her like this.

My thoughts go back to the dinner table. Why did Dad lie? Why did he bump the meeting up? Does he really think I'm going to just run off again? No, he'd tell me if that was the case. Then there's my Father. I would have expected him to look happy that his son is meeting his omega. Father's been wanting grandchildren for quite a while so what's with the silent act now? Something's wrong here. I can feel it.

"Everything will be ready by tomorrow." For some reason that casual line doesn't sit well with me, as well as the way he mentioned 'distractions'. The answer's obvious, and screaming from the back of my mind, but I can't grasp it.

I'm not smart. Not like Simon.

"I've got nothing to go back to after this."

Those words ring through my mind and I frown. In my hurt and confusion, I'd forgotten about that. Simon never really told me about his life at home, but the parts he hinted at sounded less than

pleasant.

The way he clung to me the other night, like I was the sun and the moon to him didn't exactly scream *I can't do this anymore...*

Though it would be just like him to run if he thought he was helping me. But why wouldn't he go through with breaking the bond first? Surely he knows that unless I can actually bond with my fiance there's no point in coming home anyways?

My heart starts to pound and I shiver, despite the warm room. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end and I think about my Father at the dinner table with a new clarity.

Ashamed. He looked fucking ashamed.

Everything is so wrong and so fucked up but I force myself to take a deep breath and keep calm. Dark and horrible thoughts creep up on me and the growing sensation of dread is almost overwhelming.

Simon.

Something crinkles in my pocket. I rub my eyes and pull it out. I hadn't realized that I'd kept the damn piece of paper but I'm almost thankful. I smooth the note out and take another look, desperately searching for details that I might have missed.

They're there. I don't know how I didn't see it the first time.

There are light splotches on the paper and I know without a doubt that they're tear stains. The note itself is cold and heartless, so why would he be crying while writing it?

It's all so clear now. He was forced to write it. Somebody made him write the damn note and then took him away while I was driving in circles feeling sorry for myself. I groan and my head bumps slightly against the door.

Stupid. I'm so fucking stupid.

A small part of me, the one that's scorned and hurt, wants to chalk it up to me being overemotional and grasping at straws, but the bond is strong inside of me and I know I need to get off my ass and find my omega.

For a second, I entertain the thought that those alphas I had a go at have him. Or maybe a predator passing through, but I know better. Those hillbilly alphas wouldn't have gone through the trouble of making him write a note, and the chances of it being a predator are too convenient.

Distractions. Everything will be ready by tomorrow. Father keeping his eyes focused on his plate, shoulders rigid, mouth set into a tight frown.

The answer's right in front of me, and my guts turn to lead.

Almost detached, I stand up, slipping the note back into my pocket. I pull the door open, glancing up and down the empty hallways. Dad's in his study. He's always in his study this time of

night. I can smell Father clearly in the master bedroom down the hall.

A red haze flickers across my eyes but I keep the anger tucked away even though all I want to do is barge downstairs and tear my beloved Dad apart. Instead I hold myself high and calmly make my way to the master bedroom, not bothering to knock, and feeling some satisfaction as the door slams hard against the wall.

Father sits in his armchair, a book open on his lap. His eyes widen for a moment before a tired expression takes over. I stare him down, letting my clenched fists and calm rage speak for me.

"I don't know where he is," Father says finally.

I remain silent and take another step into the room. Father tries to smile but he looks more tired than I've ever seen him. "I'm sorry. I tried to stop him. But you know Charles. He doesn't like it when his plans go awry."

"Everything will be ready by tomorrow."

Simon's still alive. I'd feel if he wasn't. But the thought that the bond could break at any moment is more terrifying than anything I've ever felt before. I'm working with a bomb that could go off at literally any second.

"Who does know?" I growl. "You're an omega, dammit! You're supposed to look out for each other!"

Father's mouth drops into the shape of an o. "You've really grown up, haven't you?"

"I don't have time for this!" I snap. "Who knows where he is?"

With a weary smile, Father nods. "Frank Barker."

"Dad's assistant?"

"Yes. Charles won't get his hands dirty with this sorry business. Frank has all the details."

"Where is he?" I ask, hands clammy. This isn't good. Frank's a powerful alpha. I've always been creeped out by the guy and I'd usually have no desire to be anywhere near him. But if he has Simon then I have no choice but to face him.

Father shrugs helplessly but I wave my hand. "I can find him. I know his scent. I can track him."

"I know you can," Father says.

I turn away but Father rests a hand on my shoulder. "What's his name?"

There's nothing but gentleness in his voice. I'm still furious that he went along with this awful betrayal, but I sigh as I can't fault him too much. An omega must obey their alpha. Reasonably there was very little he could do.

"Simon," I say quietly.

Father nods, looking almost proud. "Go find him son."

I can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips as the door

closes behind me. With a shake of my head, I quickly make my way downstairs. The beta servants must sense my determination as they're quick to move out of my way.

Dad's still in his study, but he doesn't matter. I stand just out of sight of him. Closing my eyes and concentrating, I inhale deeply through my nose. Dad's scent is the most prominent, but I can make out more. The beta servants, Father's, and the bitter smell of an alpha that likes his cigars a little too much.

When I open my eyes, I can almost see Frank's trail leading through the living room and out the front door. I glance one more time at Dad, wanting nothing more than to knock his teeth from his smug fucking face. But there's no time for that. I've wasted enough time as it is.

I've got some hunting to do.

Chapter 12

Cody

I've never had to do something like this before. The scent is faint and I have to move slowly. I take my wolf form. I need the extra sense of smell. But this is an affluent neighborhood, filled with humans. My black fur hides me in the dark somewhat, but the risk of someone spotting me is still there, keeping me on edge.

Shifters don't usually wander around like this. If I were spotted, I'm at risk of someone calling the police, or worse, animal control.

The scent trails off and I stop at the four way turn. Carefully I move left across the road, sniffing the air carefully. Then I retreat and move right, but there's nothing. I settle on moving forward a couple blocks and the scent picks back up again.

I have to be so fucking careful. I can't afford to panic and flail. Every minute is agony and every cramp or pain in my chest causes me to freeze, searching inside of me to see if the bond is still there.

Simon must be so fucking scared right now. I wonder what they're doing to him? Have they hurt him at all? The thought makes me shudder with rage, like I could go feral at any moment. I take a deep breath and force myself to remain calm. I can't lose my shit, not yet.

Soon my neighborhood is behind me. The houses gradually get smaller, more worn. The scent remains faint though, so I've still got a while to go yet. I pick up the pace and curse my Dad to rot in hell for this.

As soon as I find my trouble-prone omega, I'm never letting

him out of my sight again. An awful little voice at the back of my head whispers that I might not make it in time. I snarl to myself and try to ignore it. I will find him. I have to find him.

There's no solid line between suburbia and the city, but it's there, and I find myself nearing it. I take a deep breath through my nose, eyes closed. The scent doesn't lead into the city though, it skims the outskirts.

Of course. Dirty business like this has no place in Fairburne. As I walk, I fantasize about ripping Frank limb from limb for daring to touch what is mine. A low growl rises out of my throat.

The scent starts to become stronger as the street becomes emptier. The houses become fewer and the buildings become more desolate. I know I've entered the industrial side as I pass an abandoned factory.

The trail is strong now. There's no way I'll lose the scent. Even mixed with the smells of fire and smoke and metal, it's like a neon trail that will lead me to Simon. All the carefully contained energy inside me bursts forward and I break into a sprint. Buildings and storage lots become a blur.

When the familiar, wonderful smell of Simon reaches my nose, I almost whoop with triumph. He's here. He's close. He just needs to hold on for a little bit longer. My legs start to ache and tiny flowers of blood bloom beneath my paws but I don't dare slow down.

I'm so close to finding him now. When I do, I'll gather him in my arms and I won't ever let him go again. I'll set him in the seat of my car and we'll put this city in the dust. We'll drive and drive until the car falls apart. We'll find some nice little place away from all of this and just live.

Images of a cabin deep in the forest or a seaside house and little feet running about fill my mind, propelling me forward. I never really gave much thought to my own future. But I know that unless I get my omega back, my future will be meaningless.

Frank's scent starts to mix in with other alphas and betas now and my blood boils. It's bad enough picturing that fucker putting his hands on my Simon. To know other men have mistreated him makes me grind my teeth.

Every last one of them will die if I find so much as a scratch on my omega's beautiful skin.

Something deep in my chest pulses as Simon's scent hits me hard. I look up at the old, long abandoned brick building. Carefully, I creep around to the front. The first thing I see is an alpha female by the door. Her face is sharp and mean and I can't underestimate her. It's only a matter of time before she picks up my scent though so I have to be quick.

There's a slight breeze in the air, pulling her scent toward me, which means it will take even longer for her to notice me. I wait, crouched against the side of the building, waiting, even though it kills me to be patient.

After an agonizing few minutes, she pulls out her cell phone and turns away. I take the opportunity and lunge. She doesn't get the chance to make a sound before my paws are on her back, slamming her into the ground hard. Her head hits the pavement with a crack and she goes limp beneath me.

As much as I want to take her neck in my mouth and snap her neck, I restrain myself. And I absolutely do not land a satisfying bite out of her leg as I drag her behind a bush.

The inside of the building is old and the wood is just starting to rot. Carefully, wincing at every creak of the floorboards, I creep down the hallway, the scents of Simon and Frank like a beacon, leading me to a set of stairs. Even through my thick coat I shiver at the frigid cold.

When the voices reach my ears, my heart nearly stops in my chest. Simon sounds hoarse and raspy and I can hear a faint cough. Frank's voice is cold and emotionless. Slowly, I take that first step downstairs, breathing a sigh of relief when the stair doesn't creak.

I have to be even more careful now. Frank is far more dangerous than any alpha I've ever scrapped with. I have to be focused, patient, and ready. I have to watch every move I make now. Though I doubt that Frank will hurt me, he has my omega and I can't take any risks.

But then I hear Simon's voice, weak and pleading. Those words reach my ears and I freeze. There's a deafening howl that I think might be me as the red haze I've worked so hard to keep at bay comes crashing to the front of my mind. With those quiet little words, all thoughts of focus and patience are happily thrown out the window, leaving only one thought, clear as crystal.

Someone's going to bleed tonight.

Simon

The mattress is stiff and my stomach cramps and aches. My mouth is dry but I barely notice, unable to bring myself to find the sink. Strange, incomprehensible colours flicker across my vision and I find my tail tapping against the metal frame of the cot when the buzzing in my ears gets too loud.

And I think. It's really all I can do.

I wonder what Cody's doing right now. A desperate, hopeful part of me longs for him to come barging in. His thick arms will wrap

around me and take me away from this horrible place and the men that lurk just outside my door.

I don't know how long I've been here now. A day and a week seem the same. An hour might seem like a minute, and a minute might be an hour. For a while I drift in and out of consciousness, head resting against the concrete walls. I stopped feeling cold a while ago and I wonder if I should be worried.

At some point I wake up with my face resting against the mattress, having toppled over in my sleep. Or maybe I was awake. It's hard to tell.

The panic comes and goes but I barely react, having finally cried myself dry.

Sometimes Cody's with me now. I swear I can feel his hand in my fur and his voice whispering soothing words to me. Sometimes he tells me that he knows I would never do anything to hurt him. That I just need to hold on a little while longer.

Other times he won't touch me. He asks me why I hurt him and when I cry out in my mind to tell him that I didn't, he just shakes his head sadly. He tells me that if I really loved him, I never would have created the spell to break us apart to begin with. I tell him between dry sobs that I thought I was helping him.

The worst part though, is when he doesn't say anything at all. He just sits on the edge of the bed and stares at me, eyes cold and emotionless and I breath a sigh of relief when he finally leaves.

I rub my aching stomach a lot. I whisper into the darkness how sorry I am. That I never meant to hurt anyone. I plead for forgiveness because this is all my fault. I should never have left the safety of my house that night. I should never have been at that bar.

I wonder if Mom misses me? If she'll spare a thought to her missing son every now and then. It's a nice thought, though I'm not so far gone as to get my hopes up.

When I open my eyes now, Cody is once again sitting next to me and I press my face into his warm thigh as he strokes my muzzle.

"Not much longer now," he whispers to me.

My throats too dry to reply, but I nod weakly, allowing myself to enjoy this illusion of comfort as I gaze up at his eyes, warm and filled with love.

"You need water," he says gently. "Come on. The sinks over there. Go get some."

He's never said that to me before and I can't bring myself to refuse him. Wearily, I shift back, barely feeling the cold air on my bare skin. I pull myself up on shaking legs, whimpering as my joints crack. Blindly, I search the darkness. "Over here," He calls.

Finally my fingers find porcelain. Shakily I manage to turn the

tap on and instantly I'm instantly filled with the primal need, ducking my face under the stream. The water is coppery but I've never tasted anything sweeter.

"That's good, baby. Just hold on for me."

My stomach lurches and I pull away gasping. I stumble back to the cot and collapse, whimpering at the exhaustion this simple movement has caused, too exhausted to even shift. His hand runs through my hair.

"I love you," I whisper.

"I know."

I turn to rest my head against his leg again, but the door to the room suddenly opens, filling my vision with blinding light. I blink and rub my eyes. When I look up again Cody is gone. I can barely see, having been in the darkness for so long, but I can just make out a figure in the doorway. I curl away with a whimper.

The man doesn't say anything, just slowly enters the room. It's the alpha that brought me here and left me to languish in this filthy room. I try not to shake as he approaches the bed.

"Sorry kid," is all he says, though he doesn't sound sorry in the slightest. "It's just business."

I think he might have said something similar before, but I can barely remember. I shiver and shake. Dread fills me to the core as I hear the clink of metal and I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't know if anything I say now will make a difference, but I can't stop the words from leaving my lips.

"Please don't hurt me."

He just snorts and steps closer.

"Please," I beg. "Don't kill us. Please?"

"Us?" He sounds almost surprised and I swallow hard.

"Please. I'm pregnant."

Chapter 13

Cody

Frank's eyes widen as I lunge at him. His body flies back as my paws collides with his chest, body cracking against the wall. If he were any other alpha, the force would have been enough to knock him off of his feet.

Which is why I take a moment to glance at my omega. Fury courses through me at the sight of him. His skin is chalk white, making the dark bags under his eyes look deep purple. A sheen of sweat and pink patches on his naked body show the fever clearly. Big green eyes, glazed over with fear and exhaustion blink owlishly at me.

Unfortunately the moment costs me as Frank regains his composure. There's the sound of cloth ripping and an awful snorting sound as something sharp and hard collides with me, knocking me to the ground. I hit the concrete basement floor hard but I refuse to allow myself to register the pain, pulling myself to my feet and jumping back.

A boar. A fucking boar.

Simon lets out an alarmed cry as Frank charges me again. I gasp and roll away further. This room is far too tiny for two large animals to duel. I manage to get into a crouch as Frank charges me. He manages to land a blow to the side of my neck, tearing at my fur.

Simon whimpers again and I glance over at him. He's afraid, but his eyes are also filled with hope that I'll get us out of here. All of us. His hand is pressed against his belly, reminding me of the precious life that he carries inside of him.

I'd hoped that he wouldn't hurt me out of fear of my Dad, but apparently that's not the case. I snarl and snap, trying to land a bite anywhere, but his damn tusks block every blow. I yelp as he catches me by the neck, pinning me against the wall. I whine and wheeze as my air is cut off. I can't slip free.

He won't kill me. Dad would have his head if he damaged the goods. But I still can't afford to lose, because I saw the gun drop when I tackled him the first time. The moment I fall he won't waste anytime finishing the job. My eyelids start to droop as I fight to stay conscious.

There's a snarl and suddenly the weight on my neck is gone. Dizzily, I look up to see what happened. The sight steals my breath away.

My tiny blond wolf, no bigger than a golden retriever, has his teeth buried deep into Frank's back. The boar lets out a startled squeal and flails wildly, trying to dislodge his attacker. It's all I can do to jump out of the way as he bolts across the room, slamming into the opposite wall, cracking the bricks. Simon fall to the ground with a yelp, and the boar turns it's attention to him.

But he's too late. The diversion was all the time I needed as I lunge. My aim is perfect as my fangs sink into the leathery skin of his neck. Blood bursts on my tongue, sour and repulsive. The boar squeals, the sound making me shudder in disgust, but I don't dare let go.

The fight ends quickly. He thrashes and I feel my ribs crack as he slams me to the floor. With one last jerk of my jaw, he shudders and spasms before going limp. Wincing in pain, I crawl out from underneath his heavy frame, wearily pulling myself to my feet, standing over my kill.

Good fucking riddance.

Simon's in human form again, shivering on the floor. I shift back and stumble toward him.

"Cody," he rasps as I kneel down in front of him.

"Easy," I say gently, taking his face in my hands. The heat radiating off of him is alarming but I try to smile. I don't want to scare him. "I'm here. You're safe."

"You're real?" he asks. A weak hand reaches out and brushes my cheek. I hold my hand over his own, keeping it there.

"Yeah," I chuckle. "It's really me. I'm getting you out of here."

We can't stay human for long. Both of us need to heal. But we can't get back on our own either.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"I need an ambulance. My omega's hurt and I think I busted my ribs. I've got the people who kidnapped him here too. I'm at the industrial area, Government Street, in front of an old brick building."

"Someone will be there shortly."

Carefully, I slide my arms under his knees and shoulders, lifting him gingerly in my arms. I wince at the sound of his joints popping. As smoothly as I can, I carry him out of the awful little room and outside. Simon flinches as the morning sun hits his face and I wrap my arm further around him so that my hand is covering his eyes.

There's a groan in the bushes as the alpha female pulls herself to her feet. She glares when she sees me, lips curling into a snarl. I answer with a growl of my own as she hurries into the building to check on her boss. She must know who I am, and therefore knows better than to mess with me.

The wait is agonizingly long, though I know it's only been a few minutes at most. Simon shivers and I hold him closer to me, trying to give him whatever warmth I can. I barely notice that we're both stark naked.

They're not quick enough though. The first police car pulls in as they're halfway to their van. The cop steps out and I waste no time.

"They tried to kill my omega," I say quickly.

That's all I get out before Simon shifts in my arms. Quickly, I lower the small wolf to the ground before shifting myself. Exhausted, I curl up around him, licking his face.

Omegas aren't treated well in society, but I have full confidence that justice will be fair. Hurting a bonded omega is considered a crime against their alpha. Frank's lackey will rot for her crime. I just hope that she isn't so loyal to my Dad that she won't confess.

My heart sinks slightly. My Dad will no doubt be under scrutiny for this and for a second, I almost feel like I should deny his involvement. But then Simon whimpers and shivers beside me. He

feebly pushes his head into my neck, as if I'll disappear if he doesn't hold on. I harden my heart. Charles may be my Dad, but Simon's my omega, and carrying my child. No one fucks with what's mine and gets off lightly.

Dad will surely buy his way out of a prison sentence, but I'll make sure his reputation is burned to the ground. I owe Simon that much.

Finally the ambulance arrives. I growl as Simon is gently carried away but I don't fight the paramedics. Soon I'm lifted into the ambulance after him and placed on a stiff bed that barely fits my frame. I look across at my omega. His eyes are wide and glassy and full of fear at the strange hands touching him and settling him in.

I growl softly, letting him know that I'm here.

Simon

The sound of a low and gravelly voice slowly brings me back to consciousness and I struggle to open my eyes. It's dark, wherever I am, and for a second despair washes over me. I'm back in that room. Cody's rescue was just a wonderful dream.

But then there's a hand stroking my head and it's warm and heavy and *real*. My eyelids are heavy but I manage to open them completely. I blink a few times and notice with relief that the darkness isn't as awful as I thought. It's dim and gentle, not the terrifying black I was trapped in. There's no lumpy cot either. I'm lying on something soft and warm.

As I awaken further, I try to focus on the voice. It's soft and familiar and humming a tune. I whine softly as I struggle to move my head toward the wonderful sound. The humming stops and there's a chuckle.

"Back with me, baby?"

Slowly, my vision starts to clear. My heart cries out with joy as Cody comes into view, eyes shining. He smiles and continues to run his fingers through my fur. "How are you feeling?"

It wasn't a dream. Oh God, it really happened. A shudder shakes my body as I attempt to crawl to my alpha. His smile disappears and he's leaning toward me. "What's wrong? You hurting anywhere?"

There's such love in his voice and if I could I'd be crying, stretching my head out toward him. Immediately his arms around me, pulling me to him. I bury my head in his chest, breathing in his scent. Vaguely I can feel him rocking me.

"It's okay," he murmurs. "It's okay. You're safe now. You're both gonna be fine."

Both...the baby! I jerk away, staring up at him. He takes my head in his hand. "The baby's fine. You had a fever and were dehydrated, but you're going to be fine now."

I nod and press my face back into his chest. I want to tell him how sorry I am that I didn't say anything before. But exhaustion keeps me from shifting. He lays me back down.

"Get some more sleep. We'll talk later."

Then he shifts, the black wolf curling around me, licking my ear tenderly. I try to take in every detail of Cody's beautiful form before my eyes fall closed and oblivion takes me once more.

When I wake up next, the room is brighter and my head is clearer. I look to my right to see Cody asleep beside me. We're both human now and a blanket is draped over us. His hand is curled around mine and I give it a gentle squeeze, reassuring myself that he's really there.

We're lying on a low bed, large enough to accommodate shifters of all sizes. There's an IV sticking out of my arm. I must have shifted back a while ago.

"Welcome back."

I start slightly but relax at the sight of the beta dressed in hospital scrubs. The nurse smiles brightly at me as he checks the screen, letting out a hum of approval. He then gives a less approving look at Cody.

"He hasn't left your side at all."

I look over at my alpha again. There are dark circles under his eyes and several days worth of stubble litter his face. A small bead of drool trickles down his chin and I can't help but giggle slightly.

"Quite a looker isn't he?" the nurse says, smirking. There's the sound of running water and he's holding a cup up to me. His hand cups the back of my neck, gently lifting my head up. I gratefully drink.

"Thanks," I say, wincing at how scratchy my voice is.

"No worries," the nurse says. "My name's Glenn. Call me if you need anything, okay?"

I nod. He waves as he leaves the room and my eyes go back to Cody. Biting my lip, I wonder if I should wake him up, but by the look of him, he probably hasn't slept much.

The smile slips from my face as reality crashes into me. Memories of snarling and pleading come rushing back and I gasp. The monitor starts beeping like crazy and I take several deep breathes, trying to calm myself down.

Cody knows I'm pregnant. He found out in one of the worst ways possible and he undoubtedly knows that I purposely kept it from him. He must be so angry with me. I know I'd be. Or worse, he might be disappointed. A sob escapes me and I pull my hand free of his,

rolling over onto my side.

"Simon..." Cody mutters groggily and my heart leaps to my throat. I curl up tighter.

"Shit!" His voice is more frantic now. "Simon! What's wrong, baby? Are you in pain?"

I attempt to muffle my crying into the pillow. I'm making him worried now. It's like I can't do anything right. I struggle feebly as strong hands reach over and grasp my shoulders, turning back over to face him.

"Calm down, baby," Cody says gently. "Hey. It's okay. You're safe now. Remember?"

I nod weakly, trying to avoid his eyes, frightened at what I might find there.

"Sorry," I whimper.

"Sorry for what?" He sounds confused.

"I didn't tell you."

There's a long, drawn out moment of silence and I attempt to curl up again. But then his hands cup my face, thumbs brushing away the tears, and gently turning my head to face him. I tremble and close my eyes in avoidance.

"Look at me," he says, voice firm but also pleading. "Come on, let me see those eyes."

Unable to disobey my alpha, I swallow the lump in my throat and look up at him. Cody just smiles warmly, no trace of disappointment or anger to be found.

"That's my boy."

"Aren't you mad?" I ask, voice small.

The smile fades and he sighs. "I'm just glad you're safe. Okay?"

I shake my head. "But-"

"Hey," he cuts me off. He leans down and kisses my forehead. "We'll talk later. Alright? Don't worry about that right now. Just get better."

Another tear slips down my cheek. "You're really not mad?"

"No," he says firmly. "I promise. I'm not mad at you."

I relax slightly, the weight in my chest loosening. Cody kisses me again, on the lips this time, before climbing up onto the bed. A strong arm slips under my neck and the other wraps around my waist, pulling me close to him. I sigh and snuggle into his warm chest.

"Get some more rest," he murmurs. "I'll be right here."

Chapter 14

Cody

They finally release us after four days. My ribs still ache, but they mended pretty well. Simon made a full recovery, no medication needed, thank God. I still shiver at the words "dehydration" and "hypothermia". I packed him up in the car with the resolve to put as much distance between us and Fairburne as possible. I have no intention of returning there.

For the most part, I never left his side. There was the unpleasant little issue of talking to the police. As I thought, my Dad denies any involvement, but I was particularly vocal about my "suspicions". I know he won't face any charges, but his once stellar reputation will have this dark stain for quite a while.

Meanwhile, Frank's lackey will be enjoying a cold little cell for quite some time. The police decided that I acted in self defense.

The endless stretch of farmland is all that we've seen for a while now. Simon leans his head against the window of the car. He hasn't said much, and he's barely looked at me. A part of me worries that he's angry or upset at me, but I know better now. He thinks I'm mad at him.

Maybe I am, just a tiny bit, but I know we can work past it. Which is why we need to talk. I put it off after leaving the hospital because Simon needed rest. But the silence and tension in the car is suffocating and the misery that radiates from my omega can't be healthy.

With a sigh, I pull over to the side of the road, inwardly wincing at the way Simon flinches. I doubt he has much recollection of the hospital. I can hear his heartbeat quicken as I step out of the car and move around to his side. I open the door and gently pull him out. My hand moves to cup the back of his neck, squeezing gently.

Simon's eyes shine with unshed tears as he keeps his gaze at the ground. Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I lead him over to the grass and gently pull him down with me so that we're sitting side by side, rubbing his back until he calms down.

"I'm sorry," he croaks.

My heart cracks a bit at the despair in his voice. This needs to end now. We need to get back on the same page. I wrap my arm around him and pull him close, burying my face in his golden hair.

"I know. It's okay," I say.

"Why aren't you mad at me?" he whispers. "I didn't tell you about the baby. I was going to let you live your life without knowing your own child."

I wince again. "Okay, maybe I'm a bit upset about that."

He stiffens and for a second, he looks like he's ready to bolt. I tighten my hold on him. "So tell me why? Explain why you weren't

going to tell me." I try to keep my voice as gentle as possible.

Simon looks up at me and he looks terrified. I kiss his cheek, hoping to reassure him. He turns his head away and sighs. "I didn't want to burden you."

"I figured," I say.

"I didn't want to cause you any more problems," he sniffs. "You talked about how your dad would disown you for mating with me. If he knew you'd knocked me up too...I didn't want you to throw away your future. Not for me."

He starts to pull away from me but I refuse to let him. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I pull him up and turn him around so that he's facing me, straddling my lap. My hand goes back to his neck and I pull him close so that our foreheads are pressed against each other.

"Listen to me," I say. "There is no future without you, okay? The bond only makes me desire you. It doesn't make me love you. And I do. I love you so fucking much that it tears me in half. Fuck the money and fuck my stupid high class society. None of it is worth anything to me if I can't have you there."

Simon lets out a choked sob. "I don't have anything to give you though. I have no money and no job. I have nothing but myself to give and that's not enough. You deserve so much better than me."

This time I do roll my eyes. I press my free hand to his belly. "You've already given me something. Honestly I'd never given much thought to love and certainly no thought to having children. But now I want it more than anything in the world."

I take his face in my hands. "You are worth everything and more. I love you, and I'm keeping you. And I'll keep telling you that for as long as it takes until you believe it."

Simon tries to smile but it quickly turns into a loud sob ripping free. I quickly wrap my arms around him and pull him to my chest as he cries. We've both been through far too much in the last few days and I hate seeing him cry. I want us to be happy again. To tease and bicker with each other. But the only way to do that is to get everything out in the open and to let everything go.

All I can think about is how my omega is safe and in my arms. We're both free now. Free to go wherever we want and be who we want to be. I wonder where we'll go from here. I'll need to get a job, but I find the idea liberating. We'll have a home, maybe a pet. We'll live our lives however we want.

I'm going to be a Dad.

Eventually Simon's cries quiet down. With a final hiccup, he looks up at me with a watery smile that quickly morphs into confusion as I practically beam at him. He yelps as I lift him up into the air, thin

arms wrapping around my neck as I spin us around.

"What's happening?" he asks breathlessly. I stop and lift him up until his legs lock around my waist.

"I'm just happy," I tell him. "I'm just so fucking happy."

Simon

"Hey, Dallas."

"Simon!" He practically yells it and I nearly drop my phone. "How are you doing? Did the spell work? Talk to me, man!"

"I'm doing great," I tell him. "How have you been?"

Dallas sighs happily. "Awesome. The bond is a pain in the ass but it's not worth going back. Mom's been a bit smug but she's just glad I'm safe. I don't think she's going to let me out of her sight for a long time."

"Good or bad?"

"Good," he says, and he sounds happier that I would have thought possible. "I have to argue with her about my independence, principle of things you know? But honestly, I like being mothered. I like it a lot."

"That's great," I say. "We're doing pretty good ourselves."

"You and Cody? You guys still together? What about the spell?"

I can't keep the grin off my face. "We're not going to. We're staying together."

"That's great!" he says. "So what are you doing now then?"

"Well..." I'm practically bouncing on the motel bed. "We were thinking of moving to Frog Lake."

There's a moment of silence and for a second I wonder if the line went dead. This time I do drop my phone as a high-pitched shriek cuts through the air, mixed with static from a speaker not meant to deal with that kind of octave.

He's chatting away a mile a minute as I pick up the phone. I hear words like barbecue and swimming before finding my voice again. "Calm down!" I laugh. "Yeah. We'll be there in a couple days."

"Where are you now?"

"We're at a motel in the middle of nowhere. We just need a couple days to rest."

"Where will you be staying when you get here?"

"I don't know. There's got to be a small motel somewhere around there right?"

Suddenly there's noise in the background. I can hear Dallas arguing with someone. Then there's sounds like grunting and a pained yelp before I hear an unfamiliar voice.

"Hello? This is Simon, right?" a woman's voice asks. Just from

her tone I can tell she's an alpha. Dallas's mother.

"Yes?" I say nervously.

"You're not staying in some crap motel," she says in a tone that demands no arguments. "I'll have the guest room ready for you when you get here."

"We can't!" I protest anyway. "I don't want to impose..."

"Nonsense!" she says. "You brought my baby back to me. My home is your home. End of discussion!"

There's more arguing before Dallas's voice returns. "Jesus! You sure you still wanna move here-OW!"

I can't contain my giggle and I can hear Dallas laughing too. "I'll see you soon, okay?"

"Can't wait," he replies.

I toss the phone to the side and lie back on the bed. I never imagined that I'd feel this happy. I'd sent a quick text to Mom the other day, letting her know that I wasn't coming home. As I'd expected, she sent a reply telling me not to come back. I'd expected it to sting, but all I could feel was relief that I'd gotten it over with.

"Honey, I'm home!" Cody grins, stepping inside. "Great news! We aren't completely broke yet!"

"Yeah?" I sit up.

"I called my omega Dad. He opened a new account in my name. It's not as much as I used to have, but it'll give us a head start."

"How much?"

"About a hundred thousand."

"Jesus fuck!" I nearly choke. "Are you serious?"

Cody shrugs. "It's not much but-"

"Not much?" I stare at him. "Are you kidding me? We're fucking rich!"

"Really?" He raises an eyebrow. "That amount wouldn't usually last me a month..."

Okay. From now on I'm definitely handling the money. But that's a conversation for later. "So I talked to Dallas."

"How's he doing?"

"Good," I say, grinning. "His mother says she'll have the guest room ready for us. No arguments."

"Great," Cody replies. He pulls his shirt off before flopping down onto the bed. An arm snakes around my waist, pulling me with him. I run my fingers alone his rock hard chest and shudder as his mouth sucks and nips along my neck. "Enough talk though. Let's just enjoy the evening."

"Sounds good," I moan as he licks the shell of my ear.

Cody's dick is already hard when I grab him through his jeans. His hands are on my jeans, unzipping the fly and pulling them down. I

wiggle my bare ass, enjoying the dark look in his eyes. I squeak when his hand comes down hard, slapping the cheeks.

His zipper is already undone and he shifts from under me as he pulls them down. His cock is fully erect and rubs against my stomach. I'm already wet, and move to straddle him when he stops me.

"Wait," he says, voice gravelly.

I tilt my head in confusion as he gently pushes me to sit beside him and pulls himself up. Mouth dropping open slightly as he rolls onto his belly.

"I want you to ride me this time."

Oh fuck. I stare as he takes my fingers into his mouth, tongue slicking them up. Alphas are always on top. That's how it's always been. The thought of an omega topping is absurd and almost unheard of.

"Are you sure?" I almost stammer.

Cody nod, pulling my wet fingers out of his mouth. "Please? For your alpha?"

A shudder ripples through me. I can't disobey. With a shaky breath, I climb up to sit on his legs. Hesitantly, I pry apart his cheeks to reveal the soft pink hole. I glance over at him again, and he grins and nods over his shoulder, reassuring me that it's okay.

Carefully, I slide the first wet finger inside of him. His hole is tight and clenches immediately. "You okay?" I ask.

"Yeah," he replies. "Just be gentle. It's my first time."

I giggle as I wiggle my finger around inside of him, coaxing him to open up further. I slide a second finger in and Cody groans as I move them in and out, pushing at the walls carefully. I lick my lips and before I can help myself, I lean forward and push my tongue against his rim.

Cody's hands clench the edges of the mattress. He pants and gasps as I lick him, taking in the musky, spicy taste of my alpha. My cock twitches and aches to be shoved inside of him, but I want to take my time. I plunge my tongue into his hole, making sure to make it as wet as possible, enjoying the twitching it induces.

Slowly, I line myself up, my tip rubbing against his hole. Pulling his hips toward me, I whimper as I push myself inside of him. It's unlike anything I've ever felt before. Red hot and tight, I rock my hips back and forth, sliding in and out. Cody writhes beneath me, back shiny with sweat, legs quivering.

There's something deeply intimate about an alpha voluntarily giving his omega control, and the feeling makes me shudder. I try to slow down, to take my time. Even though my body demands release, I find that I want to make this last as long as possible. It takes all of my effort not to spill inside of him.

Cody's hips move beneath me, humping the mattress. Needy little moans and whimpers that I never thought I'd hear from an alpha are muffled by the pillow. I quicken the pace, clenching my jaw, refusing to spill until the right moment.

Then Cody makes a high keening sound that sends a violent shudder through me and I thrust as hard as I can. My eyes roll back and my limbs lock in place, shaking hard as I come. Beneath me, Cody snarls and I hear the faint sound of ripping fabric as he comes into the mattress.

I collapse on top of him, twitching and spasming, and press my face into his back, planting soft kisses on his soft skin. Cody groans and gives one final shudder before going limp beneath me.

"Was it okay?" I murmur.

There's silence, before a loud gasping laugh. "Was it okay?" His voice is hoarse and wrecked. "Fuck! You didn't tell me it would feel like that!"

I roll off his back, landing in a limp heap beside him. His face is tired but completely content. "Alphas are missing out I'm telling you."

He wraps me in his arms and kisses me hard. I return the kiss with equal enthusiasm. It doesn't last long though. We're both too spent to have another round. Cody kisses me again, gently this time, before pulling himself out of bed.

"Pizza sound okay tonight?" he asks.

"Sure," I shrug dreamily. "Whatever you want."

Chapter 15

Cody

"You sure this'll work?" Dallas asks again, eyeing the tea nervously.

"Almost positive," I say cheerfully, ignoring the withering look from Simon.

"It'd better," Brett grumbles, rubbing the bruise on his jaw.

At first Brett didn't want to break the bond at all, complaining that he had rights. Then I introduced him to Dallas's mother. From first appearance, Madison looks like a sweet, harmless little woman. Hardly more than five foot two and skinny as a twig. But she's still an alpha.

Five minutes with Madison and Brett emerged from his shop with a swollen jaw and fear in his eyes. Suddenly, separating from Dallas seemed like a great idea. I decided I didn't want to know what

happened. The ride back to Frog Town was tense with Brett sulking in the back of the car.

Dallas still cowers a bit under Brett's glare, but Madison squeezes his shoulder and he straightens up. The show of love and support makes my heart ache for Simon. He doesn't talk about his own mother much, only that it's in the past and we shouldn't worry about it.

I don't now. Because Madison took to Simon immediately, fawning over him like he's her own. Our first night in their house, she'd piled his plate high with steak and potatoes and wouldn't let him leave until he'd finished every bite.

"You ready?" Simon asks.

"Let's just get it over with," Brett says, looking in every direction but Madison's.

They drink the tea and Simon begins the chant. Within minutes both the alpha and the omega are pale and sweaty. Dallas whimpers slightly, arms wrapping around his stomach. Madison rubs his back, shooting me a concerned look. I shrug helplessly.

Brett groans and sinks to the floor. "Shit! I changed my mind! Knock it off!"

He's ignored. For once he's not in control and I can tell he hates it. A part of me feels pity, but he's caused Dallas so much pain that I let myself feel more than a little smug.

Simon continues, watching Dallas with a worried expression. I nod for him to keep going, wincing when our friend cries out and keels forward off the couch. I reach out automatically but Madison catches her son, laying him down on the floor with his head on her lap. She strokes his forehead and murmurs soft reassurances.

With a startled gasp, both Dallas and Brett howl, bodies jerking and twitching on the floor before suddenly going still. Simon hurriedly finishes the spell with a shaky voice before dropping to his knees to inspect our friend. For a terrifying moment, I can't keep the thought out of my mind that we've just killed someone.

Then Dallas is sucking in air like a drowning man, clutching at his mother's shirt desperately. I laugh nervously and Simon sighs with relief. Brett hacks and gags on the floor nearby but thankfully doesn't lose his dinner on the carpet.

"Did it work?" I ask, stepping closer.

Without a word, Brett hauls himself up and slips out the door. Dallas frowns and closes his eyes. "I think so?"

There's a triumphant roar from the front yard. No doubt Brett just decided to test it out in the bushes. The bear's growls and snarls continue for quite some time.

"Looks like it," Madison says dryly. "He's cleaning that mess

up."

Dallas laughs weakly, but his eyes are filling up and he starts to tremble. Madison scoops him up into her arms as he starts to sob. Simon stands up and takes my hand in his. Quietly, we slip out into the backyard to give them some privacy.

As soon as the door shuts behind us, I lift Simon up by the waist and spin him around. "You did it baby! You actually did it!"

Simon giggles and wraps his arms around my neck. "I can't believe it worked! I was so worried for a second..."

I cover his mouth with mine, biting down at his lower lip. I tug it gently before letting it snap back with a soft pop. "You know what this means right?"

He tilts his head, lips stretched into a content smile. "Hm?"

"Omegas are going to flock to you now. You're a hero! A crusader! You could make a fortune off of this!"

Simon frowns. "I don't want to charge omegas for this. Too many of them wouldn't be able to afford it."

"Not omegas. Alphas!" I wink. "I'm hardly the only one who was almost sold. I know dozens of alphas who would pay whatever amount you asked to get their hands on this."

"Not me," Brett growls, stumbling around the side of the house. My nose wrinkles in disgust at his fat, naked body. "That was fucking awful."

"Cover up will you? This is a decent neighborhood."

Brett looks almost offended. "Worried your little boyfriend will see what hie's missing?"

Simon snorts. "Isn't he kinda small for an alpha?" he whispers in my ear. I burst out laughing. Brett scowls.

"Fuck you both then. Fucking omegas. Not worth the trouble if you ask me." He gives us a sarcastic salute. "Goodbye. Hope to see you fucking never!"

Without another word, he shifts back into his giant fat grizzly and lumbers off. Good. Saves me the trouble of driving him home.

I sit down on the back porch, keeping Simon on my lap. "As I was saying.You're set for life now baby."

He grins and snuggles into my neck. "We're set for life." He takes my hand and places it on his stomach. "All three of us."

I wouldn't be able to stop grinning if my life depended on it.

Simon

Ultimately, I posted the spell online. Cody grumbled about wasted opportunities, but I don't care. I look at Dallas, who's pulling

his life back together and I feel content with my decision. I just want to help as many people as possible.

"So what do you think?" he asks nervously.

It's a three bedroom double-wide at the edge of the forest. Close to Frog Town's school and even closer to Dallas and Madison. It's spacious enough to house us and our child, yet cozy and inviting. It's perfect.

"I figured we'll go furniture shopping tomorrow," Cody says. "But other than that, I just have to sign the papers and it's ours."

I throw myself into his arms, kissing him deeply. "I love it!" I say. "I absolutely love it!"

It'll be so wonderful to have a place to ourselves again. Not that living with Madison and Dallas is unpleasant, far from it. But to have a place of our own to call home is unlike anything I've ever felt before.

Cody managed to get a job as a mechanic. It's perfect for him for now, but he says he wants to go back to school. He says he wants to open up his own business. Frog Town is very omega friendly and he wants to take advantage of that.

"I want to make a safe place for omegas," he told me. "A shelter for the ones in abusive relationships or were kicked out of their homes. Getting government funding will be hard but I think I can do it."

Every time I think I couldn't love him any more than I already do, I'm surprised.

Dallas got me a job at Frog Town's pub. The owner, Andy Reynolds, is a friend of Madison's. He runs a tight ship, but he's fair. On my first week a particularly drunk alpha tried to make a grab for me. Andy was quick to get between us. The alpha earned himself a lifetime ban and a new face.

"It's ours then," Cody says, kissing me on the cheek. "Welcome home."

I nuzzle my alpha's neck with a happy sigh as we sit down on the floor, backs to the wall, just enjoying silence and space. I imagine the walls filled with family pictures and the plush carpet littered with baby toys.

"Do you want a boy or a girl?" I ask.

Cody shrugs. "A boy obviously. I could teach him how to work on cars and play catch and all that stuff."

I nudge him playfully. "Come on, be honest."

He grins sheepishly. "I kind of like the name Daisy for a girl."

"Aww," I grin, laughing as he shoves me over. "You're just a big teddy bear aren't you?"

Cody huffs. "Would a teddy bear do this?"

I laugh as he pounces, large hands grabbing my wrists and pinning me to the floor. His lips crash into mine in a wonderfully hard and brutal kiss. I love it when he gets rough with me. His tongue shoves it's way between my teeth, licking and curling inside my mouth. I can feel him bulging against my belly.

We both gasp for air as he pulls away, eyes dark. "We should probably head back now."

"No," I grab his wrist. "Let's break in our new place."

Cody growls and roughly flips me over onto my belly. "And get stains in the carpet?"

"Hey!" I say in mock offense. "I don't spill!"

He groans with need as he claws at my jeans. I wiggle my hips as they're pulled down to my knees. A whiny sound escapes me as I hear his zipper. "Fuck me."

"You don't have to ask." His voice is low and deep in my ear, his tongue flicking out to taste my jaw. He doesn't bother with fingers tonight. My ass is wet and nearly dripping already. I take a deep breath as he lines up, and gasp as he quickly pushes inside of me.

My hands grasp and twist at the carpet but he grabs my wrists again, pinning them down beside me. I whimper and mewl as he rocks against me, pushing me into the floor, his breath hot against my neck.

"I love you so fucking much," he growls.

"Love you too," I whisper back.

The words seem almost weak. I guess the words that would describe how I feel about him haven't been invented yet. I suck in a sharp breath at the intense, searing pressure as his cock knots inside of me. There's nothing that makes me feel more loved than when he knots inside of me. We're locked together into a single being.

With a desperate cry, I come, my cock spilling out onto the carpet. Cody groans and thrusts with a final snarl before filling me with his seed.

Slowly, his cock begins to shrink. He doesn't pull out, though. His arms wrap around my waist and hr shifts us so that we're lying on our sides, my back pulled against his chest. I sigh with pure contentment.

"Not a teddy bear," I say. "More like a grizzly."

Cody chuckles. "Damn straight."

We lie there, a heap on the floor, watching as the room darkens. I listen as Cody's breathing grows slower and more even. I shift slightly and, even in his sleep, his arms tighten around me. The thought that we almost gave this up is inconceivable now.

This is where we belong. I have no doubt in my mind.

Author's Note

Thank you for reading my strange, strange story. The support means a lot to me. Leave a review and tell me what you think.

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Dallas

I bite down on my lip, trying not to swear as the hot coffee splashes against my hand. Quickly, I hold my reddening skin under the tap, wincing under Melissa's withering look. Of all the times I had to get klutzy, it had to be during the lunch rush.

Trying to ignore the throbbing pain in my hand, I get back to work, mixing cappuccinos and lattes, serving cookies and sandwiches, and trying to ignore snooty comments from soccer moms and yuppies. Sometimes I wonder if I should take a job at The Lakeside Pub. Trade the arrogant jerks for the drunk assholes.

Mel claps me on the shoulder as the last of the crowd dies down. "Go for your break. Get some gel on that hand."

I smile and nod. If Mel wasn't my boss, I don't think I would have lasted as long as I have. She has the look of a grandmother, with her graying hair tied into a bun. Floral patterned skirts and button up blouses. A pair of dainty glasses.

Joe Brown and his little gang would beg to differ when she chased them out of her garden with a tire iron for stepping on her carrots.

Slipping into the back of Dogwood Cafe, I hang my apron up and head for the first aid kit. I sigh in relief as the burn gel takes the sting away. Grabbing a muffin, I poke my head out into the dining area, grinning widely.

Simon Adams grins back, waving a hand. Baby Daisy giggles from his lap. I take a seat in the booth and Daisy immediately reaches for me. Chuckling, I pull her onto my lap, bouncing her on my knee.

"So what's new?"

"Not much," Simon replies. There are bags under his eyes but he looks content. "Daisy's getting her first tooth and I've gained ten pounds in three days."

I wince in sympathy. "Well that's fun."

Simon yawns loudly. "So much fun."

Daisy makes a grab for my ponytail and I grit my teeth against the hard yanks. "Easy she-wolf. She'll be stronger than me by the time she's two."

"Honey, let go of Uncle Dally's hair."

The eleven month old pouts but miraculously listens to her dad. "So how'd the prenatal tests go?"

Simon groans. "So apparently I have gestational diabetes. Cody's cleaned out the fridge. I can't eat potatoes, chocolate, pop, cookies, sugar, nothing! I'm telling you it sucks ass."

"Ouch. It'll be gone after you give birth though right?"

"Yeah," he sighs, sipping on his tea. "Five months to go."

Apparently bored with my hair, Daisy grabs at my lip ring, giving it a small tug and giggling when I yelp. I run my fingers along her belly and she squeals. Simon watches us with a fond expression.

"So you think you'll even try again?"

That question again. I never say anything but I hate that fucking question. Just like that, my good mood is gone. I shake my head. "No."

"Dallas..."

Pain. Fear. Unable to see out of swollen eyes. A massive body pinning me down as angry words meant to hurt are shouted. Never again. I clench my teeth and try not to take my frustration out on my best friend but I really fucking hate that question.

"Leave it Simon."

Thankfully he does, swiftly changing the subject to bar tending and I content myself to just listen and play with the baby in my lap. Once again, her hands go for my ponytail, pulling the end and sticking the strands into her mouth.

Of course I'd like to have children one day. I see Simon and Cody together, and sometimes my gut twists with such longing that I can barely stand it. What omega doesn't want the white picket fence?

Daisy suddenly gives my hair a hard yank, and I can suddenly hear Brett snarling in my ear. I barely hear as Simon scolds his daughter. I close my eyes, taking deep breaths until the memories of yelling and snarling quiet down. When I open my eyes again, Simon's hands are cupping my cheeks, his worried face swimming into view.

"One time..." I whisper. "One time I tried to fight back, hold my ground. He didn't take that so well. Shifted in the living room and landed on me. I remember thinking I was going to die. That he would really go through with it this time..."

Simon's eyes are shining. "Dal..."

"Sorry," I mutter, handing Daisy back. "I should probably get back to work."

I hear him calling me as I hurry back to the kitchen, nearly

knocking into Mel. Shame fills me, and I brace myself against the sink, trying to catch my breath. Now Simon's going to think I'm mad at him. I'm not. Not at all. He didn't do anything wrong.

God! It's been more than a year now! I should be over this shit. I shouldn't be having flashbacks every time I get my hair caught on something. Maybe Mom's right. I should be in therapy or something.

Mel doesn't say anything, just pats me on the shoulder and dumps a stack of dishes in the sink. She knows I need something to keep me busy when I get like this. I grab a rag and get to work on the stack, letting my mind go blank.

The rest of my shift passes in a haze of dishes and baking. Mel keeps me in the back, handling customers herself. I remind myself how lucky I am to have a boss like her. She claps me on the back as I hang my apron up.

"You need a ride home?" she asks.

"That's be great," I reply.

The sun is just starting to set as we pull into the driveway. I frown at the cars crowded in front of our house, an uneasy feeling stirring. Mel bids me goodbye as I step out, and my ears are immediately assaulted with loud music.

Shit. Mom's having a party tonight, I'd completely forgotten. Mel's already tearing down the road before I can jump back in. With a heavy sigh, I brace myself and slip inside. I just need to get to my room and I'll be fine.

The living room is packed with humans and shifters of every kind. It reeks of sweat and alcohol. I wrinkle my nose and push through the heavy bodies, dodging flailing limbs and kicking legs.

Mom's in the kitchen, sipping on a glass of wine. She grins at me as I enter. "How was work today, sweetie?"

I shrug. "Same old."

"Simon called. Wants you to call him back as soon as you can."

I wince. I hate awkward conversations, but it's my fault this time. It wouldn't be fair to keep him waiting on me. "Thanks."

Turning back, I brace myself as I slip back into the living room. The phone is across the room, sitting on the coffee table. I just need to grab it, then I can escape this chaos. It sounds much simpler in my head.

It's only seven o' clock. A bit early, considering the amount of alcohol that's been consumed. I recognize most of the people here. It's like everyone in town between the ages of nineteen and fifty are crammed into the living room.

Stumbling on stray limbs, I break free of the crowd, grabbing the back of the couch. There's a few guys lounging, and I recognize them as regulars from the diner. Hue, Miles, Ed, and Joey. All bear

shifters. They work up in the mountains as foresters. I give them a small smile. Joey claps me hard on the back, causing my knees to buckle. His strong hand grabs my arm, steadying me and I chuckle with him.

"Hey Dallas!" Hue says. "Beer?"

I shake my head. "Sorry, I'm turning in early tonight."

"You sure?" Miles grins at me, eyes dark.

"I'm sure," I reply, not meeting his eyes. I could never quite explain why, but Miles always made me uneasy. Joey's mentioned before that Miles has a thing for me. I laughed it off, but I could always feel the grizzly's eyes on me when my back was turned.

"Maybe next time." I step over to the table, and lean over to pick up the phone.

That's when everything goes wrong.

I freeze as the hand grabs my ass, fingers digging into the sensitive flesh hard enough to bruise. My mind goes blank as the phone drops from my hand, clattering on the floor. Time seems to slow down as large fingers hook into the back of my jeans, before yanking me backward.

Miles's hand comes to rest on my thigh as I land on his lap. I can feel his cock twitching beneath me. "Come on, don't be a tease," his voice is low and rough in my ear. His breath smells like whiskey.

A small whimper escapes me as I scramble to free myself from his grasp. To my horror, his arms wrap around my waist. "I know you want some, no need to be coy."

Memories of Brett having his way with me, over and over again, crash down on me. Before I know it, I'm hyperventilating, hands clawing at the alpha's arms. He growls something, but I'm panicking too hard to hear it.

There are other voices too. The room is suddenly filled with angry snarling. Other hands grab my arms, hauling me up and off of the grizzly. More shouting. I get one last glimpse of Miles's snarling face before Hue pushes me behind him.

Someone else tugs at me, and I follow blankly. The bodies aren't crowded around each other anymore, and the path through the living room is clear. More arms wrap around my shoulders, familiar and warm, and I lean into the touch.

"It's alright now, baby," Mom whispers in my ear. "You're okay."

The cool night air wakes me up. I take a few startled breaths before sinking down to sit on the porch stairs. I can't stop shaking, even with Mom rubbing circles on my back. I bury my face in my hands as I try to get myself under control.

"I'm okay," I rasp. "I'm fine."

Mom kisses the side of my head. "I'll be right back." Her voice is gentle, but I can hear the rage tinging it.

I listen to her retreat back inside, oddly calm as all hell breaks loose. I can hear Mom screaming, and the sound of shattering glass before everything goes silent. Someone sits down beside me and I force myself to look up.

Joey lights up a cigarette, face pale. "Jesus Christ! Remind me not to get on your mom's bad side."

That makes me smile. Mom's inside, defending me, protecting me. That knowledge is enough for the last of the anxiety to leave me. Joey takes a deep drag before offering the cigarette to me.

"Thanks." I take it gratefully, letting the smoke sear my throat. I don't usually smoke, finding the habit to be more trouble than it's worth, but I think tonight warrants it.

"Miles is a jackass," Joey says. "Doesn't have any sense of boundaries."

"That's for sure," I mutter.

"We tried to tell him that you're not interested," Joey says quietly. "We told him to leave you alone."

"I appreciate that."

"Sorry."

"It's fine," I shrug. "I doubt there was anything else you could have done."

Another howl rips through the house. Joey chuckles. "Well, I doubt he'll come within a mile of you after this little adventure."

Mom steps back outside and joins us, wrapping an arm around me tightly. She holds her free hand out, and Joey hands her a dart. "You're going to be one man short tomorrow."

Joey shrugs. "You know, I think we can live with that."

Gabriel

This smug bastard's really getting to me. My fists clench, nails digging into my palms. I should probably just walk away. Get in my van and put some distance between me and this rotten little town.

The omega swallows heavily as his wolf alpha pats him (hard, far too hard) on the back. Eyes shining slightly, determined not to let them fall. There are two other alphas (gorillas. Figures.) surrounding him, laughing and leering.

I down my shot of whiskey, letting the heat spread through me. I'll need it tonight. If what I think is going to happen, is going to happen, I don't want to hold back. The bartender must have noticed,

because he leans over, a serious look on his face.

"Leave it alone. It's just the way things are around here."

I laugh harshly. "Yeah? Well it's a good thing I'm not from here then."

"He's a good customer."

"I can tell."

The alpha grips the omega's arm, pulling him roughly to his feet. The omega bites his lower lip, keeping his eyes on the floor. My stomach lurches as one of the other alphas smacks him on the ass. The group heads for the door. That's my cue.

Throwing a couple bills on the counter, I ignore the bartender's glare as I casually trail behind the group, out into the night. Just as I suspected, the group of lechers disappear around the corner, into the back alley, oblivious to my presence. I wait a few seconds before following.

Though I know what to expect, the sight never stops making my blood boil. The other two alphas hand the main creep some bills. The omega is pinned against the wall, eyes squeezed shut, trying to pretend he's anywhere else. One of the alpha apes grabs the omega's crotch and twists hard, and the omega keens.

They don't even see me until I've sunk my teeth into the gorilla's arm. He howls as I fling him over my back. A loud crack echos off the bricks as he hits a wall. There's a deafening roar as the other alphas shift. The massive ape swings a fist. I open my mouth willingly, sinking my teeth around his meaty fingers. The impact rattles my skull, and I'm pretty sure a tooth goes flying, but I don't loosen my hold. My paws dig into the pavement, and I shake him as hard as I can. The gorilla roars as he pulls his hand back, my teeth leaving heavy tears in the rough flesh.

A sharp, fiery pain shoots through my side as the final alpha shifts. The big gray wolf sinking his teeth into my flank.

What a fucking joke. I shake him off easily, before sinking my teeth into his neck and flinging him away. The two gorillas have long since bailed now. The wolf snarls and lunges again. But he's wounded and sloppy. With a snort, I stand back on my hind legs, before bringing a large paw down on the wolf's head, effectively pinning him to the ground. I stare down disdainfully as the wolf wriggles and whimpers. This is my favorite part.

I growl, shake my mane, and let loose a deafening roar into the shifter's sensitive ears. The wolf whimpers again, and I pick up the sound of raised voices and approaching footsteps. I release the shifter, who wastes no time in bolting.

The omega is curled up on the ground, eyes wide with fear. Slowly, I lie down with my head in between my paws, purring softly,

showing I mean no harm. Hesitantly, the omega moves toward me, his hand reaching out. I push my nose into it.

"What the fuck!" the bartender snarls as he skids to a halt. I count maybe eight other patrons behind him.

With a low warning growl, I shift back, uncaring of my nakedness. I give him a hard glare, daring him to challenge me. The mob behind him shifts uncomfortably. The omega looks between me and the crowd, before moving to stand behind me. I shoot him what I hope is a reassuring smile.

Like the leech he is, the bartender scowls before slinking back to his establishment. The rest of the crowd uneasily disperses.

No one fucks with the king of beasts.

"Thank you," the omega whispers. God, the kid couldn't be older than eighteen.

I grin. "No worries. What's your name?"

"Leo."

"Gabe."

Introductions over, I stride out of the alleyway, ignoring the disgusted looks I receive. The omega trails behind me, unsure of himself. I don't mind. Opening the back of my van, I pull out a pair of jeans and quickly slip into them, before slamming the door shut.

The omega's still there, looking at me with big sad eyes. I grin again, before letting a more serious look replace it. "Were you bonded to him?"

Looking miserable, the omega nods. Damn. That complicates things a little bit. Oh well.

"Do you have somewhere to go?"

"Only back to our apartment," he says quietly.

"Hmm." I bite my lip. I can't just leave the poor thing here. "Well if you could go anywhere, where would you go?"

Leo's eyes widen. "What?"

I bend down and grasp his shoulders. "We could go back to your apartment, I help you grab whatever you need, and we'll hit the road. What do you say?"

A mixture of hope and awe and fear flicker across his face. I know what he's thinking, I learned a while back that it's easier to just nip that train of thought in the ass early. "No strings attached. I'm not coming on to you. I'm just a buddy offering another buddy a lift."

The look of gratitude I receive makes me beam.

"Well...I've heard of this couple..." he plays with his fingers nervously. "They found a way to break bonds. I'm not sure if they need both the people but...maybe they could help me?"

I nod encouragingly. "Good. Where are they?"

"Frog Lake," he says, so quietly I almost don't hear him.

I whistle, long and low. Frog Lake is a good three day drive from here, and that's without stopping. No wonder the kid looks terrified. I clap him on the shoulder (gently. I know how to treat humans). "Well we better get going then."

"Really?" Leo almost cries.

I hold back a wince at the hopeful look, and have to reign in my temper. No one that young should ever look that beaten down. "Of course. As long as you don't mind riding with an obnoxious old bastard who listens to way too much metal."

Leo grins back, face shining with a light no one's probably seen in years.

The bastard of an alpha is moping on the couch when we enter. He snarls when he sees me standing between him and the omega. I give him a warning glare and he shrinks back slightly. Leo makes quick work of packing his valuables into a backpack. He obviously can't wait to get out of there.

I don't blame him. Aside from the pig on the couch, the drywall is cracked, and I can make out mildew patches in almost every corner. I almost expect to see a mouse hole somewhere. I wonder, if I pulled back the stove, how many roaches would I find?

I drape an arm around Leo's shoulder as we leave, ignoring the wolf's indignant shouting. Alphas that treat their omegas like shit tend to be nothing but whining goofs. Too insecure about their masculinity to act decently, yet too weak to handle a real fight.

Within the first five minutes of driving, Leo's out for the count. Poor kid's had a tough day and an even worse life. I think back to that couple he was talking about. If they really found a way to break a bond...Fuck. Just fuck.

I keep driving until the next morning. Leo wakes up somewhere around noon, and I stop at the first roadside diner I see. Leo looks nervous as we sit down, staring at the menu forlornly. He thinks he'll have to pay for himself, and judging from the look on his face, he's probably got about fifty cents to his name.

"Relax," I say. "It's on me. Pick whatever you want."

When the waitress comes to take our order, I take a moment to admire her red hair, giving her a charming smile. Pink tinges her cheeks slightly as she grins back. "What can I get you boys today?"

"Well honey, I'll take the pancakes and sausage with three eggs, over easy."

She smiles and turns to Leo. "And you dear?"

Leo glances at me before looking up. "I'll have...waffles I guess."

The cheapest thing on the menu. Figures. "He'll have the

Belgian with a side of scrambled eggs."

There's that wide-eyed look again. When the waitress leaves, he frowns. "That's too expensive!"

"And you're too skinny," I reply. "Rule number one when riding with me, no complaining about the music. Rule number two, if you're hungry, you eat. And no cheap little dollar pancakes or chips either."

He nods and lowers his head, but a small smile tugs at his lips. He's not nearly as bad off as some omegas I've met. Considering what I walked in on, he's a pretty tough little bastard. A few days of being treated like a person will do wonders.

When our food arrives, I practically inhale mine. Within five minutes, I've cleaned my plate. I lean back in the booth and sip on my coffee. Unfortunately, Leo sees how quickly I've eaten and tries to quicken his pace. I raise an eyebrow when he nearly chokes. "Slow down. I'm not in a hurry."

Okay. It'll probably take more than a few days for him to fully relax. I wonder if Frog Lake has any therapists.

Grabbing an energy drink on the way out the door, we climb back into my van. Leo looks troubled as he buckles his seatbelt. I nudge him gently. "What's on your mind?"

He doesn't say anything for a minute, then looks up at me with watery eyes. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

Well shit. I smile. "I like to think I'm a nice guy."

"Most nice guys don't do all this for someone they just met," he insists. There's a hint of desperation in his tone. Desperation to understand what's going on.

"Okay, so I'm really nice guy then," I grin.

Leo just looks miserable. I squeeze his shoulder. "You can tell me what's bothering you. I won't get mad. Promise."

I'm asking a lot of him. I wonder how many times someone's promised not to get mad, only for the kid to end up with a bloody lip or a black eye. I can't truly understand what it must be like for him to trust a complete stranger to keep their word.

But eventually, and to my relief, Leo starts talking. "I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. For you tell tell me to drop my pants or something..."

He flinches as the words leave his mouth, peeking up at me. I nod for him to continue.

"Alphas aren't this nice. Not to omegas like me..." his chin wobbles. "I just want to know why..."

I sigh, and he closes his eyes, bracing himself for some sort of explosion. When it doesn't come, he looks back up at me. I try to look as non threatening as possible.

"Listen," I say, smiling gently. "You really want to know why

I'm doing all this for you?"

Leo nods.

"I've known too many omegas who got the shit end of life. I got sick of seeing people get hurt. Not when I could stop it."

Leo bites down hard on his lip.

"Does that make sense?" I ask finally.

Leo nods. "Yeah. Thank you."

"No worries."

END BOOK ONE

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About the Author:

Ruby Nox hails from a beautiful town off the Pacific Coast. She enjoys writing about big strong men, and shy, innocent boys. Her favorite animal is the crow, and her passion is writing m/m romance. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that every guy she's ever had a crush on was gay.

In her spare time she enjoys baking cookies and watching Star Trek.

You can find all of Ruby Nox's books at:
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The Carpenter's Apprentice

By Van Barrett

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Prologue:

– Ethan Mailhot –

"You're serious?" Johanna's mouth hung open. "You *still* haven't told Jake?"

"Well –" I froze, trying to think of some suitable excuse. But an excuse wouldn't come. "Well, no! I haven't!"

"How long are you gonna wait, Ethan? You keep saying you feel bad for 'screwing him over' by leaving … but you're gonna screw him over a lot worse if you don't give him enough time to find a replacement!"

I groaned. I knew she was right. "Yeah …"

"We've already signed a lease … *and* you've been accepted at the University of Chicago. There's no point in waiting any longer!"

"Yeah." I nodded guiltily. I kept my eyes focused on the piece of wood that I was whittling. It was a little hobby I'd picked up in the past few years. It's fun to start carving away, not knowing what you're gonna end up with – but the form always comes through in the end. The wood always tell you what it wants to be.

"Are you still having second thoughts about going back to school?" she asked, her fists going to her hips. Her tone was a touch more patronizing than it was reassuring.

"Uh, yeah, I am," I mumbled.

"You're older now. And more mature than when you were a freshman! They say that guys' brains develop later, and that school gets easier as you get older. So I think you're gonna be fine."

But it's not what I wanna do, I thought to myself, my brow furrowing and an air of dread swallowing me whole.

"… Yeah," I grumbled. "Maybe you're right."

"So, is that *all* you're worried about?" she asked, pressing further.

I let out a small sigh. "… No."

"Then what?"

"You know." Long pause. My hands kept working with the knife, wood shavings falling at my feet. "Us."

"Uh oh," she groaned. "Not *this* again."

"Well what if it doesn't work out, Johanna? Living together is a *big* commitment! You know that."

"It's not just us, though, Ethan. Larry and Simon and Charles

signed the lease, too, don't forget. If we break up, so what? It's not like we'll be sharing an apartment *only* to ourselves. They'll be there too. I'm sure we could all be friends …"

I couldn't help but feel that the possibility hung over us like a sword dangling from a thread.

"Hmm …" I shook my head, trying to push the doubt away, but it just wouldn't go.

I'd sure feel better about this whole arrangement if she could just acknowledge that it *was* a serious thing – maybe even a bit of a risk! – to move in with your significant other. Living with an ex doesn't sound like a walk in the park to me.

And, of course, the fact that we've already broken up four times doesn't ease my mind much. But I'm tired of having that argument. No good ever comes from it.

Besides. There's some part of me that *has* been screaming for a change. I don't know what it is I'm after, but I know I need it.

"Alright, Jo. I'll tell Jake this week. I promise."

1

– Ethan –

Dressed and ready for work, I kept a watchful eye out the east-facing front window while I waited for Jake's van to roll up. Off in the distance, the early morning sun stood proud over the horizon, ready to rule the land for another day.

I don't care if it sounds corny – I felt myself filled with wonder and almost wanting for breath while I watched that hauntingly beautiful blood-red sunrise. Tangerine clouds, still tired from the long night and not yet ready to part, tried to obscure the sun's glory. But the sun wouldn't be denied, and streaks of sunshine stabbed right through the cotton-puffs until they broke up into wispy trails and then dissolved into nothing.

Staring at the deep-red sun, I remembered an old adage Jake once taught me:

Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky at morning, sailor's warning.

I tipped my head thoughtfully. It was funny how often that saying was right. I wouldn't have guessed it'd storm today – 'cause it sure *looked* like it was gonna be another beautiful day. But I knew

better by now than to doubt Jake's quips and folk wisdom. He had a weird way of being right, even if his methods sometimes seemed, um, antiquated.

I had a sudden panicked thought and hoped that the red sunrise wasn't an omen for a *different* type of storm heading my way. I did, after all, have something of a confession to make today. The thought of it made an anxious muck in my belly fester and roil. I hated to be the bearer of bad news – especially to someone who has done so much for me.

***

I'd learned to appreciate nature a little bit more, ever since I met Jake. When I first met him, in fact, I didn't even know that the sun rose in the East and set in the West. Yeah – really. I was that bad.

But that's kind of the big difference between me and Jake. He grew up in the country – his dad and grandpa were both carpenters before him, and they lived a sort of 'backwoods' lifestyle. They didn't wanna be anywhere near the city limits once they got off work. Jake says he spent his childhood running around outdoors barefoot, climbing trees and wading through streams, hunting, and all the things country kids do.

Hunting. Yikes. I've never picked up a gun, let alone fired one. I don't think I could shoot an animal, even if it *was* a rabid raccoon trying to terrorize my chickens at night. What would I do instead, you ask? And I dunno, I really don't – maybe I'd wave my arms and hoot and holler and kindly ask him to move along?

If you can't already tell, I grew up in the 'burbs of Buffalo, with a *very* different upbringing than Jake's. Our neighbors' houses were right next door – not miles away like at Jake's. When you 'played outside,' it meant you ran around your small front yard or back yard, and never went into the street because cars were constantly zooming by – and far over the speed limit, too.

And that meant there wasn't a whole lot to do outdoors. So I didn't feel like I was ever missing out. While Jake grew up lassoing cows or whatever it was he did, I spent my formative years behind the glow of a computer screen. I thought the internet was the coolest place anyone could ever be … I mean, all of life's answers were conveniently explained and put on a website, just one click away. People all over the world wanting to chat. Games. What else could you possibly need?

Oh, by the way – Jake is absolutely *clueless* around computers. He might be able to navigate his way out of the woods based on the constellations in the sky, but he couldn't make a Google search to save

his life. I mean this is the guy who actually calls websites, 'internets.' Like, “hey, Ethan, go on that Google internets and look up the price of pressure-treated lumber …”

I think he might be purposely making that mistake just to be a stubborn stick in the mud, though. He knows I hate it.

Truth be told, when I was younger and I saw people like Jake out in public, I used to think snide things and turn my nose up at 'em. What can I say – kids can be mean. And when I was a teenager, there was *nothing* lamer than a truck-drivin', camouflage-shirt-wearin', redneck with a mullet.

Not that Jake looks like the stereotypical *Joe Dirt* type hick. He doesn't at all. But he does have a certain grizzled toughness to him. That determined, 100-yard stare that people adopt when they've made it all on their own and come to rely on *nobody* else. Because they've learned the hard way that other people only let you down, or try to get real close to you by acting like your friend, only to outright fuck you over in the end.

Now before you start thinking I'm a judgmental asshole – and I wouldn't blame you for that, by the way – don't worry. Karma got me. Because while I thought hicks were the worst thing ever, my computer usage wasn't totally normal, and kids in my school took notice.

My last name is French – *Mailhot,* pronounced “may-yo.”

And while I was slowly growing into a computer nerd, all the jocks and cool-kids were way more interested in *getting pussy*. They noticed I wasn't quite like them. And soon, my last name was predictably yet cruelly twisted into something else: *Hotmail*. Yeah, Hotmail. That was my nickname throughout high school.

I hated coming back to school after summer break to start a new grade. All the other kids had their glorious, golden tans from spending all those long hours under the summer sun. Me? …

“Hey Hotmail! Lookin' awful pasty! Ever try going outside? Or didja spend the whole summer fappin' to porn in the basement again?”

Har har. Yep. Sure did.

I continued on that path up until my freshman year of college. And then something crazy happened. I felt suffocated. Like I needed a big, *big* change, but I didn't know what the hell it was.

I finished out my freshman year. And while my grades weren't bad, I had *no idea* what the hell I wanted to study – the thought of turning *computers* into something I did for pay, something I *had* to do day in and day out, horrified me.

And already with ten thousand dollars' worth of student loan debt building over me, rising like a giant tsunami that threatened to crash over me … well, that kinda scared the hell outta me, too.

I scoured the job ads over the summer. Just looking for a

summer job. I applied for an apprenticeship with a carpenter – mostly as a joke. I thought I was too gangly, too weak, too pale for that kinda work. I didn't think the carpenter would even reply, let alone hire me.

But to my surprise, Jake called me back for an interview. I went, even though I knew I shouldn't, and met him in person. Even crazier? He hired me on the spot.

And to the biggest surprise? I *loved* the job. And I never went back to school. Even though my girlfriend and my family wanted to kill me over it.

And still do!

***

Right on time, I saw Jake's white work van slow to a stop and turn into my driveway. His business name – JAKE THOMPSON CARPENTRY – was emblazoned on the side of the van with his number below it. I felt my heart skip a beat with excitement, 'cause it was time to start my day. I jumped off the couch, grabbed my lunch-box and ran out the door.

I trotted over to Jake's van, opened the passenger side door and climbed in. The smell of freshly cut wood filled my nostrils and soothed my being – it was a smell I always loved, and one I was constantly immersed in ever since Jake hired me. Most my friends smell like fryer grease after a hard day's work … me? Wood. Doesn't get any manlier than that.

"Hey Jake." I settled into my seat and buckled the belt.

I glanced over at him. Only seven years separated us – I was 22, he was 29 – but they were seven hard years. His strong features – high cheek-bones, rugged jaw-line, square chin – added to his whole *weathered* look, but in a way that said he was only gonna get better with time. If he ever chose to re-marry, the lady he snagged was gonna be real happy when he hit 60, had sexy laugh-lines permanently etched around his eyes, and started going gray.

Not that *I* care or know anything about that. I just hope that *I'll* still be looking good at that age, so my wife will be happy with the way I mature. But, you know, a guy can sometimes notice these things about another guy … it doesn't really mean anything.

Anyhow, Jake wasn't the type of guy that shaved every morning – another plus of being your own boss, 'cause when you ran your own business, you didn't *have* to shave every day. And so I could really make out the striking glints of red in his auburn stubble when it caught the sunlight.

But one thing he *did* keep up with was his haircuts. He loved to keep the sides and back neatly trimmed, with a little bit of length up

top. There, you could see the natural waves in his thick, healthy locks.

"Mornin', Ethan." He turned and grinned at me the same way he did day after day. Something about his smile – the way the corner of his lips turned up, but the rest of his mouth fought back to keep from smiling *too* big – always made me crack up. He truly seemed happy and excited to see me again … even if he didn't want it all to show.

Hey, it's nice to feel appreciated, that's all. It's definitely better than working with a guy who gives you that dismissive nod. The one that says, "oh … great. *You* again. Sigh. Alright, let's get these miserable 9 hours over with."

"See that sunrise?" Jake asked. He put his hand around the back of my seat so he could back the van out of my driveway. My stomach lurched pleasantly as he put the van in gear and sped off.

I nodded. "Sure did. Sailor's warning, hm?" I pulled out my smart phone and tapped away at the screen. "But according to my weather app, we've got clear skies all day and night and a 0% chance of rain."

"A *zero* percent chance of rain, huh?" Jake laughed. The corners around his jade-green eyes crinkled upwards. "Pretty ballsy prediction. Who needs room for error, eh?"

"Yeah, really." I ran my hands through my dark brown hair and tucked the longest part just behind my ear. "Guess we'll see who's right in the latest battle of man versus machine. Or, in this case, Weather.com versus your old-ass wives' tale."

Jake chuckled and slugged my shoulder. "Yeah. We'll see." He didn't hit me hard, of course – just playfully. But Jake was a big guy, a strong guy, and even small movements carried the force of his brawny muscles. What I'm saying is, it didn't *hurt*, but I sure felt it, alright.

"So what's the agenda for the day, boss?" I asked, discreetly rubbing the spot on my shoulder that felt kinda sore, but kinda good all at the same time.

"Got a client who wants to revamp their living room. We're taking a wall out to expand it into the dining room. We also gotta tear out all their old hardwood flooring, 'cause they want new boards."

"Sweet."

He turned us onto the freeway. I couldn't help but notice his bronzed arms as he clenched the steering wheel. His thick, meaty forearms had a bushy aura made up of his curly arm hairs. By the end of the day, those forearms will glisten with sweat and be dusted with saw-chips.

I've seen it enough to know, after all.

I glanced down to look at my own arms. My forearms, not nearly as big or as muscled, only had a fine dotting of still-blonde

hair.

Hmm. I had a ways to go 'til I was as rugged as Jake. Then again, maybe I'd never get there. Especially if I was up for a career change.

A silence came between us. Not an uncomfortable or awkward silence. Just a natural silence when there wasn't anything more to say. Still, I leaned forward and turned the volume knob up. Jake always had the radio set on a country music station.

And even though I think he only likes country in a jokey sort of way? I have to admit – ever since I started working with him, and overcame my natural repulsion to country music – secretly, deep down, I kinda like country music in the same ironic way.

The song on the airwaves this time was *I Swear* by John Michael Montgomery. And like we did every morning, we both belted out the lyrics, crooning like maniacs:

"*I swear / By the moon and the stars in the sky / I'll be there / I swear / Like a shadow that's by your side …*"

… until we couldn't keep a straight face and both busted-up into laughter.

Okay, so yeah, working with Jake was pretty awesome. And being his apprentice was by *far* the best job I've ever had. It's pretty a rare thing, after all, to have a job that you get to look forward to in the morning. The kind of job where you can forget about everything else going on in your life and just work hard, sweat, and let it all out.

Which is why it's gonna suck so bad when I have to tell Jake I'm leaving him.

But that's exactly what I have to do if I wanna stay with my girlfriend. Time was running out and it wouldn't be fair to keep this from Jake – like a big, dirty secret – when he *should* be using this time to search for a new apprentice he can trust. He has to have the next guy trained and everything before I leave, after all.

Thinking about it made my ass slide lower into my seat. *What a bummer.*

But just then, Jake pulled into the driveway of a big house in a cookie-cutter sub-division.

"Welp, we're here."

2

– Jake Thompson –

I watched Ethan come bounding out of his house and run up to my van.

"Mornin', Ethan." I had to fight back too-big of a grin when he climbed in. Something about that kid was so damn lively and fresh. Most mornings, I start the day feelin' stiff. Tired and achy. I ain't complainin'. I've always heard that once you start to near 30, your body starts creakin' and groanin' in strange new places. And when you work a physical job like I do, well, sometimes it takes a little while to get goin'.

But a funny thing always happened when I saw Ethan in the mornings. That kid always smiled so big, showing all his white, perfect teeth. It was like he really *wanted* to be up this early. That he was excited for our day. I dunno, it was refreshing somehow. Suddenly I didn't feel so fatigued. My back didn't feel so tight. I felt lighter. His enthusiasm spread to me like a bush fire.

Now, that's all fine and good … but I *know* I have to watch myself and guard my feelings carefully. 'Cause they have a funny habit of sneakin' up on you and runnin' away in the most god damned inconvenient manner.

It's stupid to get feelings for a guy. I've known that since I first started getting them – trouble's the only thing that ever comes from it. Ethan's a great kid but he's also my *apprentice*. Besides all that, he's got a girlfriend and he's straight as hell.

Yeah, I can say all that, but I can't help myself, either. I stole little peeks over at Ethan while I drove. I saw him sweep his thick, wild brown hair back with his hand. That little move – right there – he looked like a goddamn male model.

Each furtive glance at him was like a blow right to my gut. I know I shouldn't look, shouldn't even entertain the idea. Then again, put a bright enough candle out in the middle of the night and moths are gonna fly into it.

He's so god damned cute. He's 22. That's really the perfect fuckin' age for a guy – when he *just* starts turning into a man. He's got a man's frame, a man's face, though he ain't quite grown into either yet. He's still a little immature, but he's learning more and more everyday.

I miss being 22, man. That's when everything really changed for me. When a tornado came along and changed my life path. I had the whole world laid out before me, even if the thought frightened the crap outta me.

Ethan's got delicate features. Nice eyes, a deep blue like the ocean but with flecks of yellow around the pupils. He's got high and

wide-set cheekbones that complement his dimples. A nice straight nose with a cute little upturn at the end. His lips are a blush pink, the color of a rose just before it blooms. They look as fuckin' soft and velvety as rose petals, too.

Fuck.

And I'm a fuckin' creep. I know I can't be attracted to a straight guy. It's so fuckin' useless and hopeless. *Especially* when he works for me. Jesus.

But sometimes, I swear I can feel his eyes on me – looking at me. I can feel his gaze, almost like a red-hot iron on my skin, and sometimes I turn and look at him just in time to see his eyes dart away. He does that thing that people do when they've been caught staring. He looks somewhere else.

I know it doesn't mean anything. But sometimes I wonder.

Like I said. Gotta keep your feelings in check. They've got a habit of getting all optimistic, and you start thinking all sorts of wild things, and then all your hopes just get crushed in the end. So why bother.

***

I wish it wasn't this way. I wish I was 'normal.' Growing up where I did, around the people in my life, God bless 'em … but it only made things harder.

Here's an example. Guys talk about gaydar. I've even heard straight guys talk about having 'gaydar.' Wanna know somethin' funny? If you grow up out in the middle of nowhere, you never get your fancy gaydar set. 'Least, I never did – mine's so defective, *I* didn't even set it off. The whole 'carpenter farmboy' thing is like a coat of stealth paint. *Nobody* sees that one flying by on their gaydar. So really, I get the worst of both worlds.

I'm probably the lamest gay guy on Earth. I don't do gay bars. I don't do dating internets. I just get little crushes on the few straight guys in my life. Crushes that I try to squash, try to stop thinking about, but only grow bigger and wilder until eventually … well, until nothing ever happens. Eventually they're not in my life anymore and that's that.

But at least I can admit I'm gay now. That's a start. 'Cause for too long I was tryin' to jam a square peg into a round hole. And it wasn't working.

Whatever. Like I said, I ain't complainin'. It's just the hand that life dealt me. And you know what? I got a daughter, and my own business, and that's more than enough to keep my hands full – I don't need any extra drama in my life. All I gotta do is make sure I'm the

best Dad I can be and provide for her future and for myself.

And trust me, I got my work cut out for me. Truth be told, it's hard work as an independent contractor, especially a young one like me – and I'm just barely scraping by. When you go the independent route, instead of joining the Union? The name of the game is word-of-mouth advertising, and getting referrals from satisfied customers.

It takes a long time to get your name out there. But you just have to grind through long days and work your *ass* off. At the end of the day, you better have knocked that customer's socks off – because their friends will come over and see what a great job you've done to their home, and they'll recommend your name. And slowly, you build your client base, you add new jobs.

That's another big reason why Ethan means so much to me – and why I need to get a hold of myself when I'm around him. Kid was green as hell when I hired him, but I liked what he had to say. I thought he had a unique perspective. And man, did I ever hit the jackpot. Kid's a real fast learner and does great work for me. He's better than a Union journeyman at this point with only a few years under his belt.

One thing's for sure. I dunno what I'd do without him. Lose my shit, probably. So yeah. Having a crush on him isn't the best idea I've ever had.

3

– Ethan –

I followed Jake out of the van and up to the client's door. Jake walked with a confident swagger, his thumbs always tucked into his front pockets. Next to him, I couldn't help but feel myself walk with a little strut myself. It was infectious.

We were men who worked with our hands. Men who *built* things. And that made me feel cool, since it seemed so rare these days. So yeah, I was proud. Damn straight.

Jake pushed the doorbell button in. We heard it ring. Then we waited for a minute or so. Nobody came to the door. Jake grumbled and pressed the bell again. And again and again. But still nobody answered.

“The hell,” Jake muttered. “They said their daughter would be home. I got their cell phone number in the van, lemme go check.”

Just as he started to walk back to the van, we heard the door finally unlock and open.

A girl, probably about my age, appeared in the cracked-open door. Her eyes were squinted and puffy with sleep, her long brunette hair tousled. She wore an oversized t-shirt and big, baggy pajama pants. She'd obviously been sleeping, and she had a hard time opening her weary eyes.

“Hello?” she croaked, her voice hoarse.

“Mornin'. I'm Jake Thompson. I was hired to do the renovation in your living room.”

“You're *who*?”

She opened the door wider and took a skeptical peek at me, and then Jake's van, which had his business name and number emblazoned on the side. She blinked, her eyes adjusting and opening wider. Then she looked back at Jake. Now she looked at him like she was seeing him for the first time – and she looked him over from head to toe.

I looked over at Jake, curious to see him through this girl's eyes.

He wore a heather-grey t-shirt that he'd probably had for *years*. It'd been run through the wash countless times and worn thin by now, with tiny holes popping up all over it – giving little glimpses at the hard chest and abs underneath the thin cotton. *Bet she likes that.*

He wore Wrangler jeans that were a loose fit but still hugged his thighs. I leaned back a bit. She couldn't see it from where I was standing, but his rounded butt stood high. I rolled my eyes – *she'll really like that once she sees it.*

From a woman's perspective, it wasn't a stretch of the imagination to see why Jake was so sexy – he was undeniably handsome. He had a hard body. And he was one of the best at his craft. A guy so skilled with woodwork, his confidence built higher and higher until it oozed over into every other area of his life.

Yeah, it was pretty easy to see why ladies dropped their panties around him so fast, alright.

Satisfied to see things from her point of view, I looked back at the girl. I noticed the way she snagged a bit of her bottom lip between her front teeth. I chuckled under my breath. After three years of working with Jake, I'd seen first-hand the way Moms and daughters turned into piles of mush around the 'hunky' carpenter and found themselves all tongue-tied. Always offering to make him lunch or get him a drink.

“Heh.” Jake cleared his throat. “My name's Jake Thompson. I'm a finish carpenter. Your Dad said you'd be home to let us in. He didn't tell you anything about the renovation?”

"Ohh." The girl nodded, like she was faintly remembering. "Right. Yeah, my Dad said something about somebody coming over sometime … come on in, I guess."

"Thanks. We gotta bring our tools in first."

"Okay. The door's unlocked. Come in whenever." She started to shut the door, but then pulled it back open again. "I'm Sarah, by the way. Holler at me if you need anything."

Jake walked back to the van and I hurried next to his side, huddling close to my boss so I could joke around and maybe make him laugh.

"I think she *likes* you, boss!" I said quietly and jabbed my elbow into his side. "But what do you think about her? She your type?"

"Oh, please," Jake groaned. He pulled the van's back doors open and grabbed a bunch of tools. "Where do you come up with this stuff?"

"She seems kinda like a space-cadet, though. Maybe not your type." I tapped my chin. "Then again, I don't know *what* your type is, anyway. I never met your ex-wife … or any of your girlfriends, for that matter …"

Jake groaned again. "Maybe you're just jealous."

"Yeah, right!" I gave him a sassy look as I took up an armful of tools. "I have a girlfriend, remember?"

"How could I forget?" Jake turned and made his first trip into the house.

***

We brought all our tools inside and went to work.

Tearing down a wall is easy – that's the fun part. Punch a hole in the drywall, stick your hand in the hole and break off huge chunks of the drywall until nothing's left. Then you can see what you're dealing with. You've got your lumber frame and your electrical. Now all you gotta do is make sure you don't shock yourself while you bust the wood frame apart!

While I broke their wall down, Jake tore the old floorboards up. He worked fast and hard, like always, only stopping for an occasional sip of water.

Before long, a couple hours had gone by, and we'd made a real mess. Making the mess is fun – cleaning it up, not so much. But a job's a job, and I put on my leather work gloves and started carrying out all the scrap, all the hardwood floors with their pokey nails sticking out.

Jake had really worked up a sweat by this point – he always did, anytime we did a job, even if I didn't feel hot at all. Probably

'cause he always pushed himself so hard. Anyway, it didn't take long before Jake's arms glistened with dew and his shirt slowly soiled, sticking to his abs.

I happened to look up right when a trickle of sweat rolled down Jake's temple. He pulled the hem of his shirt up and wiped his brow. Thanks to that, I got a glimpse at his bare, chiseled abs underneath. *Wow,* did he ever have a stacked set that made me stew with a burning that had to be jealousy. It wasn't fair … some people were just gifted with great genetics. I don't think I could have a six pack, no matter how many sit-ups I did.

And then, out of the corner of my eye, I realized someone *else* had just witnessed what I'd seen.

It was Sarah, the client's daughter, and she'd come to check on our work. Except now, she wasn't wearing her pajamas anymore. Instead she'd changed into something more revealing: a spaghetti-strap tank-top with no bra, and hot pants so short, the bottom curve of her butt just peeked out when she walked.

Whoa, I thought, my eyes wide. *Why the heck is she dressed like that? When she's home-alone with two strangers? Kinda crazy, ain't it?*

She strutted through the room, walking back and forth in front of Jake, pretending to be interested in his demo work. “Looks good so far! Can I get you boys anything? Maybe you'd like something to drink?”

Jake said no thanks, he was fine. I shook my head, too.

Sarah pinned her fists to her hips and pushed her chest out. “Oh, okay. Well, just let me know if you want anything. I'm in college but all my classes are in the afternoon and evening. So I'm *always* here, always home alone while my parents are off at work.”

Wow, I snickered to myself as she walked off. *Obvious much?*

But Jake didn't take the bait. That was one good thing about him. I'd seen how other guys stare at women with that creepy leer, or obsessively eye-ball their breasts, or her ass or legs, or whatever … but I'd *never* seen Jake act like that. And thank God for that, because it always squicked me out when I saw my friends do that. I mean – have some restraint. Sheesh.

We went back to work until it was time for lunch.

4

– Ethan –

We ate our lunch sitting in the back of Jake's van, our feet

dangling over the bumper.

"You know, I really think that daughter's got the hots for you, Jake." I bumped my shoulder into his.

"This again?" Jake sighed. "Maybe it's *you* she wants. You're closer to her age, anyhow."

"You think she wants someone her *own* age? No way. No *way*. Older guys are way hotter. Everyone knows that, Jake. Especially older guys that are still fit and don't have big beer bellies."

"Thanks," Jake groaned sarcastically. "I'm not *that* much older than you, you know. I'm only 29. You make it sound like I'm pushing 60."

"Yeah, well … with the way you eat …" I rolled my eyes playfully. "Let's just say you're lucky you're blessed with good genes."

Jake chuckled. We always gave each other a hard time about how we ate – but for *very* different reasons.

"So what's for lunch today, Ethan?" Jake asked.

I unzipped my lunch-box and pulled out the small, neatly-packed plastic containers.

"Let's see. I got seared salmon, steamed broccoli, brown rice … and to drink, of course, my veggie smoothie – today it's spinach, carrots, ginger, apple and orange."

"*Blech!*" Jake stuck out his tongue in disgust.

"Oh please." I laughed. "What're *you* having, Jake?"

Jake pulled out a package of Hungry Man and held it in the air, displaying it proudly. "Steak and potatoes. Naturally."

"Hungry Man!" I guffawed. "You can't be serious! You know that stuff is *loaded* with sodium, right? You're practically canning yourself from the inside!"

"Ahhh, hell," Jake laughed. "Look at me. I'm as healthy as a horse." He pulled his tattered sleeve higher so it bunched up on his shoulder and flexed his impressive bicep. The muscle compacted, forming a hard knot with a chiseled peak. I swallowed, my eyes taking note of every crevice, line, and vein of his still-clenched muscle.

At last I cleared my throat. "… Yeah. Healthy as a horse on its way to the glue factory, maybe."

Jake chuckled and gave me a shove. "Ah, fuck you, man."

I felt a sudden buzzing in my pocket. I pulled my phone out and took a look. It was a text message from Johanna, my girlfriend. I opened it and read the message – reminding me to *tell Jake* and telling me we should meet for dinner tonight – while Jake went off on some crazy old person rant.

"You know, for as opinionated as you Millennials are, and for all the time you spend lecturing everyone on their health choices? You sure spend a *lot* of time with your faces behind those glowing screens.

You know *that's* not healthy, right? Fifty years from now, everyone's gonna look back on you guys the same way we look at all the people who used to smoke cigarettes in the 1950's. All those microwaves or whatever going straight to your head! It can't be good for ya!"

"You know." My phone made a shutter-snap noise as I closed it and put it back in my pocket. "Last time I checked, *you're* a Millennial too, Jake."

Jake broke out into laughter. "Sure doesn't *feel* like it! I didn't grow up with a computer in my house. I think that tells you all you need to know. Matter of fact …" Jake reached into his pocket and went fishing for his cell phone.

"Oh no!" I groaned. "Not this again!"

"See this?" Jake held up his blocky Motorola phone. "This has served me *fine*. Since–"

"Since 2005 … yes, Jake … I know … you've told me."

"First cell phone I ever got, only one I'll ever need, too. It gets calls *and* texts. Even though I hate those. Why can't people just pick the damn phone up and call me if they wanna talk so bad?"

"You sound so old right now, Jake … I can't stand it …" I rubbed my temple, whimpering. "Alright, you win. I take it back. You're not a Millennial."

He gave a big grin. "Thanks. I feel so much better now."

But I let out a heavy sigh. Johanna's text message had reminded me of the bad news I had to break today, and it felt wrong to sit here and joke around with Jake while I was holding something big from him.

Jake must've picked up on my change in mood, too. "Everything alright, bud?" he asked with a touch of concern.

"Yeah …" I trailed off. "But actually I gotta tell you somethin' serious, man."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Um." I kicked my legs anxiously over the bumper. "Fuck. There's no easy way of saying this. Johanna graduates this spring and she wants to move to Chicago in June. And, uh, I'm going with her."

Jake's Adam's apple made a noise as it plunged deep down his neck and then slowly bobbed back up. "No shit?"

"Yeah."

"Well damn, dude. I'm – I'm happy for you."

"Thanks."

"You two got a place lined up and everything?"

"Yeah – uh – actually it's not just us two. It's us plus a few of our friends. And the place is *real* small and expensive. Chicago is one of the most expensive cities in the US, did you know? We had to get co-signers and everything …"

“God forbid it ever happened, but what would happen if you two broke up?” he asked.

“Um, well, Johanna's pretty sure since we'll be living with our friends, it wouldn't be weird or anything.”

“Oh. Huh. I see.”

“Yeah.”

Jake's eyes crinkled up at the corners. “You sure sound excited.”

“I am?” I tried to sound convincing, but even I could tell that I sounded unsure instead.

“I'm just kiddin' ya, Ethan. I know big change is hard and scary. I get it.”

“Yeah. You can say *that* again.”

“You got a job out there yet?”

“Well that's the thing. Johanna thinks I'm not gonna be able to find a job, since I'm not in the union and don't have any actual certifications … she wants me to give carpentry up totally. She thinks what I *really* should do is just take out some student loans and go to school out there and start a new path instead.”

Jake inhaled deeply, slowly. “No kiddin' … you know what you'd study?”

“Nope. Still don't, all these years later.”

“Oh.”

I suddenly felt a warmth rush into my cheeks. I hated that topic anytime it came up. *Really* hated it. I wanted to change the subject. Badly.

“So yeah, anyway. Obviously you'll have to find somebody else 'cause I won't be able to work with you anymore.”

“Yeah. Shoot.” Jake frowned, and suddenly my heart slowed mournfully and throbbed with sadness. I hated it. I couldn't stand to quit jobs or make people upset.

“I wish I could stay longer, Jake.”

“Yeah, me too. That's a bummer. But it is what it is.” Jake nodded matter-of-factly. But a mistiness in his eyes, like a warm lake steaming on a cold morning, betrayed his softer side. “Tell you what, though. I know a couple carpenters over in Chicago that I could call. They might be able to work you. Can't promise the pay will be great, but it's somethin', and it'll get your foot in the door at least.”

“Man! Really Jake? You'd do that?”

“'Course I would.”

Jake cleared his throat and reached over. He gave my neck muscles a good squeeze and playfully shook me around a little … but in a way that let me know he *was* a little hurt, a little disappointed deep down.

"You're the best apprentice I've ever had. I mean that."

"Thanks," I said quietly. "And thanks for not judging me for moving with my girlfriend … some people have said some mean things about it being a mistake …"

"I get it, Ethan. I get it. You gotta follow your heart."

"Yeah," I nodded. "Whew. I was really afraid to tell you that. My heart's pounding."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a crumpled up pack of cigarettes. Jake's eyes bulged at the sight. "Smokes! You're kiddin' me!"

"Yeah, well," I stammered, sticking an unlit cigarette between my lips.

"I was joshin' you about the phone, but since when do you *smoke*? What's up, Mr. Health?"

"I don't smoke, not really … they're Johanna's! She left 'em at my place, and I brought them because – because I'm under a lot of stress lately!"

"You Millennials, man! You kill me!" Jake took the cigarette out from my lips before I could light it and he crumpled it in his fist. "I don't wanna see you smokin' around me. You'll have to sneak off and do that behind my back if you're so determined. I ain't gonna stand for that shit. Go smoke in Chicago, but not around me."

"Aw, Jake! You just wasted it! There's only a couple left!"

"Good! I'll smash *those* too!"

I was glad playful Jake was back, and that he wasn't all sour over my move. It was funny that Jake cared so much about me smoking … even if it made Jake seem like a giant hypocrite, because his eating choices were so bad! But the point was, it was nice to feel protected, like someone was watching over you and wanting to make sure you made safe choices.

I stashed the cigarettes away and didn't bother trying to smoke anymore. Lunch was basically over anyway and it was about time to get back to work.

I grinned at Jake as he stood up. He smiled back at me, but then he winced, like he was in pain. He squeezed his temples between his big hand and groaned in pain.

"Dude, you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah," he mumbled. "Just a bad head-rush. Been havin' em lately."

"Oh. Shit. Weird."

"It's nothin'. C'mon, we gotta get back to work now."

"'Kay."

5

– Ethan –

We spent the rest of the day cutting the hardwood floor to fit and laying it down. The hours flew by. I was happy that playful Jake was back when he smashed my cigarettes, but – well, the rest of the day he was oddly quiet and really seemed like he was in his own world.

And I get that. I really do. He'd invested three years of training in me, and now he was gonna lose it.

It just sucked to see him be so quiet.

Anyway, as the day went on, Jake only sweated more and more, until his shirt was *totally* drenched. And then the thin cotton *really* clung to his muscle-bound chest, and you could see just how jacked he really was.

Of course, that meant Sarah kept coming by to make check-ups on our work. I couldn't take it anymore. I rolled my eyes at her openly every time she came strutting by, trying to find some excuse to talk to Jake.

It was just so, so obvious. Especially when she picked the next room over as the spot where she wanted to fold her laundry – even with all the sawdust flying through the air, the banging and hammering, and the loud mechanical screaming of power tools.

And by *laundry* I mean an assortment of her sexiest panties and thongs, all brightly colored and skimpy as hell.

I clicked my tongue. *You're trying way too hard right now. Can't you see he's not interested?*

I felt that familiar, ugly feeling of jealousy – the way it stewed in your stomach and churned your guts with a sickly warmth. I wasn't sure why I should be jealous, though. So what if this girl liked Jake and not me?

I had a girlfriend, after all! One I was moving half-way across the country to be with! I didn't have any damn reason to be jealous.

Part of me wondered what would happen if I wasn't here right now – if Jake showed up for this job alone. And it was just him and the client's college daughter. She'd probably throw herself at him …

wouldn't she?

And what would *Jake* do, if I wasn't here? If he didn't have to act like he didn't even notice her? If he did what came naturally to a man – what his carnal desires were surely demanding of him?

They'd be an odd couple, that's for sure. She looked too … too fresh, too delicate. I wasn't sure what kind of girls Jake liked, since he never talked about them. But I was sure he probably went for somebody a little more experienced, a little more distinguished. Someone who knew what it was to put your blood, sweat and tears into your passion.

Not some fresh, dainty little flower that thought she'd always have her youth and beauty, and would have an epic freak out the day she realized her looks had started to fade.

That wasn't Jake's type at all. At least, I didn't think so. But who knew, really?

Before long, it was 5 PM and time to call it a day. Our shirts were soaked with sweat. Sawdust lingered in our hair and caked our damp arms. We tidied up and clambered out to Jake's van, climbing in with tired, satisfied sighs.

Jake started the van. But just as he put it in reverse, he slapped at his pocket and mumbled. “Aw, fuck, I forgot my phone in there. I'll be right back.”

“You mean the phone you don't even need?” I shouted after him as he jumped out of the van and ran back to the house, hoping to make him laugh. I looked through the window, hoping to see a smile on his face, but didn't see any.

Aw, man.

When a couple minutes rolled by and Jake still hadn't come back with his phone, I started to get suspicious. What if … what if Jake hadn't *really* forgotten anything inside? What if he only *said* that, but really he ran into the house because of that girl?

Would Jake really do something like that? So dirty and wrong? Jake was the ultimate professional. And sleeping with a client's daughter – even if she *was* practically throwing herself at him – was completely and totally *un*professional.

The thought made my cock tingle in my boxers. “Uh oh,” I whimpered quietly.

Because once your manhood starts to shamefully lengthen in your boxers? Forget it. It's over. It doesn't matter how much you *really* don't want to get hard. Once your glans rolls free, and your sensitive head rubs against the smooth silk, and the lovely friction makes your balls ache?

It's *done.* It's gonna get hard. No matter what you want. And then your member is snaking lower, until it expands past the leg of

your boxers, and rubs against your jeans.

"Oh god damn it," I moaned, running my palms over the stirring length at my thigh. *Damn* it was already so hard.

Filthy images flashed through my mind while I sat in the idling van, waiting for Jake to come back. I imagined Jake storming into that house, making his way to that college girl's room like a man on a mission. That's where he'd find her, sure enough. Her face lights up with a look of knowing, a smirk that she *knew* she'd get him in the end …

But then that smirk of hers melted away, because now it was *his* turn to take out his frustrations.

I could just see how big and hard Jake would be after a full day of enduring her teases. The way his manhood bulged in his pants, sticking out of his waistband like a big log. I could just picture the way that silly girl would stare at it and laugh, her jaw hanging open in amazement, unable to believe that he was already *that* big and hard. And what would she even *do* with it?

Oh man, I cried softly. Speaking of big and hard … the throbbing in my pants wouldn't go away and I was doing *everything* I could not to touch it.

I looked out the windshield, scanning from side to side. Jake's van had tinted windows. *And* I had a great view of the front door. There was no way Jake could come out of that house without me seeing him first.

What if I touch myself? Just a little? It might help relieve some tension.

"You're so naughty," I chuckled to myself. I couldn't help it. I ran my palm over the solid shape running down the thigh of my jeans. "Oh, fuck yeah."

Just don't ask me when stroking a hard cock *ever* helped relieve tension. Unless, of course, you … well. I'm not even gonna *think* about that right now. Because that was definitely not on the table. The point is, a man desperate for a little touch will tell himself *any*thing.

It felt so good, my eyelids grew heavy and I let them fall shut while I imagined all sorts of dirty things going on in that house. I moaned quietly as I glided my palm over the throbbing thickness under my jeans. I slid lower in my seat, gently thrusting myself against my hand.

My manhood had gotten so hard by now, I knew I had to stop. There'd be *no* hope of trying to hide that thing if Jake ever came back. Which, hopefully he wouldn't, at least not for a few min–

"Oh!" I shrieked as the sudden jarring sound of the driver side door being whipped open shocked the hell out of me.

Oh no oh no oh no.

I scrambled to sit up, to hide my arousal under my hands while Jake climbed into the driver's side. Touching the big shape stretching half-way down your thighs only looks even more suspicious and weird, but what choice did I really have?

"Whew. Long day." Jake pulled himself up into the van and sat back with a long sigh.

I locked my fingers together and put my hands over my thigh. It wasn't perfect, and I couldn't hide it all, and the guilt and shame actually made it rage harder. But I was doing all I could.

Jake turned and gave me a suspicious look. "Everything cool, dude?"

"Yeah!" I said quickly, my voice strangely high-pitched. "Of course! Why!"

"Uh." Jake chuckled. "'Cause you're acting funny."

Just then, I noticed his eyes darted down. At my hands. And *maybe* what my hands were busily shuffling around on, trying to awkwardly find the best angle to cover it – *but I really don't wanna think about my boss seeing my hard cock, okay?!*

I cleared my throat, desperate to draw Jake's attention anywhere. "So uh, you sure were gone for a while. What the hell took so long in there Jake?"

Jake sighed. "That girl."

I shot Jake a wide-eyed look, my worst fears confirmed, and bit my lip. "Oh yeah? What about her? What happened?"

"Well, she was in there when I went back in, and she kept trying to talk to me. I told her I just went back in 'cause I left my phone layin' around. But then she started telling me that she was getting ready for her yoga class later, and started trying to show me all her poses."

"No way! I don't believe you!" I laughed. "I know some yoga. What poses did she show you?"

"Um, I don't remember? Let me think, there was a … a downhill-sled dog?"

"Whoa. Downward facing dog?"

He pointed his finger at me and shook it. "Yeah! Yeah, that's the one. And um … well – she did the splits, I know that one. There was another one about a bridge, a plow, and a happy baby, and um …"

"Oh my God! She showed you happy baby?" I panted with disbelief. "More like, she'd be happy to *make* a baby … with you."

"Ew. Gross, Ethan. Get your head outta the gutter."

"She wants to bone you *so* hard, Jake."

Jake groaned. "I don't even wanna think about that."

"Why? 'Cause you know you'd give her *exactly* what she wants?"

"You're actin' funny." Jake gave me an odd stare as he backed the van out of the driveway and drove off. "I dunno what's gotten into you, but you're actin' *real* funny."

"So you promise you didn't do anything with her?"

"Of course I didn't! You think I'm stupid?"

"Okay." I folded my arms, feeling satisfied and maybe even a little victorious. "Good."

"You're *nuts,* man." Jake chuckled as he turned us back onto the freeway.

Thankfully, my dick had calmed down, and I didn't have to keep my prayer-hands covering up my shame the whole ride. We were quiet again. I stared out my window and watched the scenery roll by.

Well, it didn't quite look like a storm yet. But what *had* been a clear day was now turning into something of an overcast drear.

Jake pulled up to my house. He turned to me and clapped me on the shoulder. "Hey. Good work today buddy."

"Thanks Jake."

"Have a great weekend, alright? I'll see you Monday."

"Yeah, you too, Jake."

I hopped out and ran inside.

6

– Jake –

This is the oddest fucking day of my life, I thought to myself, shaking my head with disbelief as I drove home from Ethan's.

When he told me he was moving to Chicago? Felt like somebody tore right through my chest, grabbed my heart, ripped it out and stomped on it. Can't believe that happened, after I'd been gushing to myself about how lucky I was to have him.

Without Ethan, I'd have to get a new apprentice. That meant training somebody new. That meant work was gonna slow down for the next year or so. Time I didn't really have. I could hire someone more experienced, but then again, that meant more money I didn't really have.

Fuck.

I don't blame Ethan for moving on. Not at all. Carpentry ain't

for everyone and frankly, it's admirable that he's gonna chase this girl to Chicago. Even if he doesn't exactly sound totally pumped. That's none of my business anyway.

I was real down in the dumps when he told me the news. I tried to hide it as best I could, but my throat felt all knotted up. I felt like an old dog who knows his time has just about come, and all he wants to do is crawl underneath the porch and not see anybody and let himself slowly pass. Okay, that's a little extreme. I don't wanna die. I'm just sayin'. I felt like I'd been dealt a pretty bad blow.

The craziest part, though, was that something *else* managed to take my mind off Ethan's move completely.

Yeah, I know that girl was flirting with me. Let's just say I attract a certain … type. The type of girl who thinks my lack of interest is actually just part of some big crazy mind game – where I look the other way and so she keeps trying to take things to the next level until I finally do look.

They think I'm the strong and silent type. That I'm naturally shy, and that I'm not very good with women. And, well, they're right about all that. (For what it's worth, I'm not very good with men, either.)

I feel bad. I like girls. Just not, you know, … like *that*. I actually feel really bad about it. Because I'm sure there's a way I could handle it better, and let them know. But I have such a hard time, I just freeze up and don't know what to do. I wish I could say, *sweetheart, trust me, it's not you! I'm just gay, okay! I like men!*

But I can't say that. I have a *really* hard time saying that.

Anyway. That's not the big story.

The big story came after I managed to break away from her and got back in the van.

I opened the door and Ethan scrambled. I didn't see what he was doing, but he had that guilty shuffle that everyone gets when they're caught doing something they shouldn't be doing.

Oh God, that's always so embarrassing. I can't stand it when that happens.

So I purposely *didn't* look. I didn't *want* to know what he'd been doing. Who knows. Maybe he was looking at naughty pictures or videos on his phone. I climbed in, closed my eyes, let my head roll back and gave out a long sigh.

I was buying him time – time for him to hide whatever it was he'd been caught playing with. 'Cause, really, I didn't wanna know.

I gave him as long as I could to get it together. Even still, he couldn't stop acting all nervous and giddy. What the hell was his deal?

And then, from the corner of my eye, I realized how oddly he was sitting. With his hands all neatly folded. But not centered squarely

in his lap, like a normal person would sit. No, instead, his hands were off-centered, half-way down his thigh. It looked awkward. Out of place. Not quite right.

So my eyes instinctively shot down. To see what was wrong with this picture.

And oh.

Oh.

My God.

Kid is packin'. Holy shit. His hands can't even cover the whole thing. That's why his hands were shuffling all around on it. He was trying to find the best angle to hide it from me. And, by the way, he was failing miserably. He was so big and hard and long, he could only cover half of it at a time.

But *why* he's packin' right now, in my *work van,* is completely beyond me. I don't have a clue. He's a little old to be getting random boners. This ain't high school anymore and it's not like he's 15. A 22 year old man should be able to have some control over that part of his body by now. If he ain't got it by now, then … I dunno … that's odd. Really odd.

I only took a short look. I hope. Time kinda slowed down, so I'm not totally sure how long I stared at it. But I know I was screaming at myself not to stare. Still. I saw it long enough to see just how big it is. And to see all the sexy hard lines. The swooping curve of his head.

Damn. It took all my strength not to lick my lips.

Okay. For fuck's sake, Jake Thompson. Get yourself together. This is *exactly* what I told myself I can't be doing. So the kid popped a random stiffy. Let it go.

I raced the rest of the way home. I had to take a shower and clean up before I headed out again. I drove up my long gravel driveway and skidded to a stop. Ran inside and jumped in the shower.

Fuck.

I know that I'm not supposed to do this.

But the hot water running down my tired muscles felt so goddamned soothing after a long day. And the steamy fog all around me was like being plunged into a heavenly realm where every breath heals you, cleanses you. And the boner that's been *torturing* me ever since I saw the thing Ethan was trying to hide … just throbbed and ached with every pump of my heart.

I couldn't help it. I wrapped my big hand around my sweltering member and gave it a few tugs.

“Oh yeah.”

That knot in my throat finally started to loosen, finally started to come undone. I buried my head against my forearm, my fist a tight ball against the shower's tile wall. I pumped myself into my fist,

thrusting my whole body weight upwards.

"Oh yeah, oh yeah."

I was thinking of *Ethan,* of course, god damn it. I'd never done that before – I'd kept him *pure* in my mind. But right now? I can't help it. Maybe it's because he told me he's gonna leave me soon, so now I'm allowed to defile him. Or maybe it's because I saw almost every inch of his hard dick right through his jeans.

Whatever it was … this time, I wasn't able to stop myself. My self-control flew out the fucking window.

Oh man, what I would do … if he was curious, just for a day … if I could kiss those plump pink lips. If I could just coax him to pull his jeans down a little. His boxers, too. Let his thick manhood spring out. Suck his balls. Lick him from the bottom up to the top. Until he's panting and moaning, begging to finish in my mouth.

And oh, I'd let him, alright. Oh hell yeah, I would. I'd love to.

"Ungh!" I grunted, and I lost myself in my fist. My seed spilled from the cracks between my fingers, rolled down the side of the tub.

"God damn," I groaned, feeling a little woozy. I held my palm up to the shower head and let the hot water blast the sticky seed off.

I told you not to do that, Jake, I thought, shaking my head at myself. *You still gotta work with him for a few more months! A lot can happen in that time.*

It's just a policy of mine. Don't beat it over straight guys. And that rule is doubly important when the straight guy is your apprentice and you gotta see him almost every day of your life.

Oh well, I thought and finished up my shower. I climbed out and toweled up. Took a while to clear my mind, ate a little snack. Then it was time to go.

7

– Jake –

I drove out to Kristi's house, my windshield wipers on the lowest speed to wipe away the light but steady drizzle. It was dark, thanks to the cloud cover that made the world seem like it was all bundled up, just like the group of kids in their puffy winter coats playing a game of tag outside their house.

My eyes darted back and forth as I drove past the monstrous houses that lined the street with hardly any space between them. *Mushroom farms* – that's what me and Kristi used to call them back

when we were together. Because those houses popped up fast, almost overnight, like a mushroom.

We'd *never* live in a mushroom farm. Some people did, some people loved living in those neighborhoods – and that was fine for them! But I couldn't ever see myself living there, and Kristi said she couldn't, either.

We'd be driving somewhere on the road, see a new development quickly popping up where only trees had been a few short weeks ago, and point at it and shout –

"Look! Another mushroom farm!"

Our house, we always said, would be grand and large and somewhere out in the country. It'd have two stories, with a sun-room, and plenty of South and West-facing windows for the house plants. We'd design it together, of course, and naturally I'd build it all myself. And there'd be plenty of land, so we could have a garden as big as we wanted, and grow all our fruits and vegetables ourselves. We'd make a giant pond for all our future kids to fish in and ice skate on during the winter months …

… On and on and on. The house always grew bigger in our heads, the amenities more luxurious. And I guess it had to get bigger and bigger. Or else we might realize that the foundation we built it on was so shaky, we didn't stand a chance.

My career was in its early days, and if times are tough now? Well, we *really* didn't have much money back then. We had to scrimp and save whatever we could. We clipped coupons every day. Hell, a *mushroom house* was totally out of the question – let alone our country dream house. Just paying rent on time and having enough left over to eat was an admirable goal.

Kristi worked at the concession stand of a movie theater, slinging giant popcorns and sodas to huge lines that built up just before show-time, and then, a minute later, quickly vanished into thin air. When people asked her what it was like to work there, she always quoted that saying somebody made once about being a soldier in war – it was "long periods of boredom, punctuated by short moments of sheer terror."

Ah, Kristi. The girl had a sense of humor, alright.

I tried my hardest to make things work. I really did. I constantly pushed my doubts deep down where I wouldn't have to hear them, and soldiered on. That way I could live a 'normal' life like everyone expected. That's what you were supposed to do, right?

And then, once I started to make some money and get ahead? I found our dream spot in the country. The house was an old house built in the 1900's, and in pretty bad shape. The plan was to live in that until I could build the dream house. So I bought it.

And then … everything else happened.

Now I just live alone in my drafty old house in the country, with termites eatin' through the foundation.

I saw Kristi's house come into view, the one she shared with her husband Dean, and pushed all my old nostalgia aside. I slowed and pulled the van into her driveway. The iron gate was shut, which always made me roll my eyes a little bit. *Not like there's any privacy in this neighborhood anyway.* But whatever. I rolled the window down and pressed the communication button and waited.

I heard static. Then my ex-wife's voice. “Who is it?”

“Hey. It's me.”

“OK.”

A beep followed. Then a motor whirred and a chain pulled the gates open. I drove my van up the short driveway and waited.

Belen came running out with Kristi walking behind her. I climbed outta the van and picked Belen up as she ran into my arms.

“Hi Dad!” Belen is a real cute kid, wise beyond her years. Honestly, I think she's already smarter than me. The stuff this girl already knows at age 9 just blows my mind.

“Hi string bean! How are you?”

“Good!”

“You ready for your dance lesson?”

“Yessss!” She squealed. She loved her dance lessons. I love takin' her just to see the smile on her face.

I opened the door for her and she got in and buckled up. “Good. I'm glad. I'll take ya out to eat after. Then we'll go home and maybe do some art.”

“Awesome!”

I shut the door for her. Kristi was standing in the doorway, watching us with her arms folded. I waved at her and she nodded.

“Hey Kristi.”

“Hey Jake.”

“I'll see ya Sunday night.”

“Okay.”

***

After Belen's dance lesson, I took her out to eat. The rain was coming down a little harder now, with small raindrops but cold ones that really kinda stung when they splashed your bare skin.

We went for pizza. Belen stopped eating meat a couple years ago so we always get vegetable toppings instead. Her choice for tonight? Only her favorite – tomato and basil. She had a couple slices and I pigged out on the rest.

After dinner, we went back to the house. She told me she had some homework she wanted to do before art. That's another great thing about Belen – she actually *wants* to get her school work done. I don't have to nag her about it.

So I set a glass of chocolate milk on the table next to her while she cracked open her algebra textbook. She started taking advanced math classes this year – she has to get shuttled over to the junior high school to take math with 8th graders.

"So how's this going?" I asked as I took a seat next to her and looked over her work.

She never needed my help. I knew that in a couple years, I probably wouldn't even be *able* to help her.

"Oh, it's pretty easy," she said, pushing her brunette hair back behind her hair as she quickly jotted down an equation and went to work on solving it.

I watched quietly for a while.

"So. Your Mom told me that some of your friends haven't been too nice to you lately at school."

She lowered her head and pursed her lips in that way that kids do when they're feeling embarrassed or bashful.

"Do you wanna talk about it, sweety?"

"Not really."

Argh. Poor girl. The thought of it breaks my heart. I wish I knew how to make her feel better. I thought of what I could say.

"Well … sometimes in life …" an image of Ethan flashed through my mind. "Uh, things don't always go our way …"

Belen looked up at me with a sarcastic look. "Gee, Dad, *thanks*. That makes me feel better." She rolled her eyes and laughed.

"Err. Sorry. That's not what I meant to say." I scratched my head. "What I meant was, when your classmates see you doing so well, they feel bad about themselves and then they take those bad feelings out on you."

"*That's* better," she laughed.

She went back to work on her homework. I sat next to her, spaced out, thinking about how I was gonna lose Ethan soon. And what that meant for everything else. For one, I'd be a lot busier …

I snapped out of my trance when she slammed her algebra textbook shut.

"Done!" she exclaimed.

"Whoa. Really."

"Yup!"

She jumped out of her chair and got out her art supplies. She loves to draw and we spend a lot of evenings on her favorite activity – drawing floor plans for the house I'm always promising I'll build

someday.

Which I think is kinda funny. Belen loves the idea of building our country dream house. The dream shifted, kinda – Kristi isn't part of it anymore. But Belen loves it just as much. Probably more, actually.

"I want an atrium here … a sun-room here … an upstairs loft that will be my bedroom …" She kept her head low and close to the paper, drawing up a new floor plan. "And this can be *your* room that you'll share with your husband someday."

Resisting the urge to groan, I quietly let out a big breath.

It was a year ago that my ex-wife Kristi told Belen that her Daddy likes men. *Yeah.* That got me a little upset, since I didn't think it was Kristi's place to tell her. But I guess Belen kept asking her Mom why we got divorced since we still get along so well, and eventually Kristi couldn't take the questions anymore and told her the truth.

I couldn't believe it. Imagine how much that could mess up a young kid!

… Luckily, Belen isn't a normal kid. She's smart as hell and she's really with it. She actually got all excited when she found out, and now she's always asking me when I'm gonna find somebody. She thinks it'll be really 'cool' when I have a husband.

Sigh. That thought frightens me. And I don't even have the heart to tell her that her that Dad isn't gonna find anybody. 'Cause he doesn't know how to find anybody, and the older he gets, the less he even cares about being alone.

"Uh oh. What's wrong, Daddy. You look worried."

"What? Nothin's wrong." My face scrunched up and I tried to laugh it off.

"Yeah, *right*! Something is bothering you …"

Belen is *far* past the age of just being able to lie to her. She picks up on it, and then she wants answers. It's hard. Or maybe telling the truth makes things easier. I dunno. But it seems like a lot to put on a kid sometimes.

I sighed. "Okay. Yeah, you're right. I got some news today that's gonna make the next year pretty busy for me. Like, really busy."

She lowered her head and worked on an equation. I could tell she was trying to hide the frown that was sneaking across her lips. That almost broke my heart.

"So … does that mean … That we won't be able to start building the house this summer?"

I frowned and nodded.

"Oh. Well … why? What was the news?"

"My apprentice is moving."

Her eyes grew wide. "Oh no! Not Ethan! You *love* Ethan!"

I was actually a bit taken aback. “How the heck do you remember his name?”

“Oh c'mon, Daddy, you talk about Ethan *all* the time.”

“No I don't. Not all the time.”

She giggled. “Yeah, you *do*, actually.”

I groaned. As much as I love Belen, sometimes I got glimpses of what it might be like when she's a teenager and can't stand me. That shit literally terrifies me, because at 9 years old, she *already* sees right through me. Brutal.

“I wanna meet Ethan someday.”

“Well, I dunno about that, sweetheart. He's gonna go soon. He's moving to Chicago.”

“Do you like him?”

“Of course.”

“I mean *like*-like him.”

I groaned again. “Belen, he's just my apprentice.”

The wind outside had really started to pick up. It whistled and howled as it cut past my old house. I could hear the giant trees nearby creak and groan as they swayed. A rolling wave of thunder in the distance crackled and grumbled. Belen's eyes lit up. She loved thunderstorms.

“You about ready for bed, missy? It's getting late.”

“Aw, man!”

“Hey. Look on the bright side. You can fall asleep listening to the storm.”

A sneaky grin spread across her cheeks. “Yeah, okay.”

I tucked her in. After, I spent some time sitting on the patio watching the thunder light up the horizon in the distance. The storm was really haulin' ass, each bolt of lightning looking like it was getting closer every minute. *The battle between man and machine, huh?* I thought with a smug grin. I picked up my cell phone and started tapping away a text message.

I don't normally send those. It took a while before I got it written and pressed 'send.' I got a few butterflies in my stomach, hoping I'd get a reply soon and checking my phone non-stop.

Made me feel kinda like a Millennial, actually. I guess I can see why they're all so addicted to these things.

8

– Ethan –

I met Johanna at her apartment Friday night. On the way over,

I picked up some barbecue dinner from her favorite spot. And while we ate, I told her the good news.

"So. Get this. Jake says he knows a couple carpenters out in Chicago. He says he'll put in good word for me and they might be able to take me on. Says that he can't promise the pay will be great, but that at least I'll get my foot in the door. Isn't that awesome?"

Johanna smiled and nodded. But I couldn't help but think I saw something else in her eyes, too. What was it?

"Don't you think that's awesome?" I asked again.

"Yeah, sure." She pushed her baked beans around her plate with a fork. "I mean I guesso."

"The hardest part of moving is finding a job, Jo! I was really freaked out about it. But if I know I have a steady job going into it … then I won't have anything to worry about."

"Yeah, of course." She shrugged.

After dinner, Johanna said she wanted to meet our friends downtown at the bars – Larry, Charles, and Simon, the guys we were going to move to Chicago with. I laid on her bed and watched while she got dressed.

"Jake thinks it's gonna rain tonight," I said while she rifled through her wardrobe. I thought that information might help her pick something suitable for the rain.

She didn't turn around, just kept digging through her clothes. "Not according to the weather channel."

"Yeah, but … he's usually right."

After she dressed, I watched her put on makeup. Slowly, I started to realize that something wasn't quite right … that she was being *quiet.* And I knew that when she was quiet, it meant something wasn't right. But no matter how much I asked her?

"I'm fine! Really!" But she said it in a way that sounded short, dry, and snappy.

My eyes narrowed. I knew things weren't *really* fine. But what could it be?

It didn't matter how much I pressed, because I wasn't going to get my answer. Instead I found myself clamming up, too.

Once she was dressed, we walked downtown to hit the bars. It was a long walk, made even longer by the fact that we weren't *talking* to each other anymore, and I had no idea why.

That's how things had sort of become with Johanna lately. Especially when we started having problems a few years ago – the problems that started when I dropped out of school. Ever since, it seems like there's some stupid little thing we're constantly arguing about.

But right now, she wouldn't even tell me what it is. So

whatever.

We finally made it to the bar. She ran up to our friends, and I swear I saw her shift into a different person almost immediately. Now she was outgoing, fun and happy, talkative – not the quiet, dour person she'd been just a few minutes before with me. She jumped into her friend's arms, gave everyone hugs. She told them about her day, including interesting details that she hadn't bothered to tell me earlier.

I tagged along, like a lost puppy dog, trying like hell to look like I was having a good time. But secretly, on the inside? I was torn up, wondering what I'd done to upset her this time.

It wasn't until late, when our friend Larry came up to me to talk, that I got my first hint.

"So, like, Ethan," he said with a grin that told me he'd had more than a few. His eyes looked watery and red.

"What's up, Larry?"

"How's the apprentice gig goin'?"

"Fine, fine, it's going fine."

"Yeah? Jo told me you might wanna do it in Chicago, too." He held his beer can defensively, tucking it against his sternum. "Is that what you're thinking?"

When did she even have the time to tell him that? I wondered.

"I dunno." I shrugged. "I might. We'll see." I stared off into the distance, then looked back at him inquisitively. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm just wondering what you're gonna do when you're 40 and your body is broken down and you can't work anymore. It's tough work in the trades, man. My grandpa was a miner and he died when he was 54. You really oughtta go back to school ASAP and start catching up with the rest of us."

Larry nodded his head at me, like he'd just passed on some sage wisdom. He punctuated his advice with a long pull from his beer can.

I groaned. "Larry … c'mon. You know I've tried school. It wasn't really for me."

"Dude. C'mon. You're being difficult." Larry leaned in and spoke quieter. "Johanna wants you to go back to school, man. We don't need it getting weird in the future household, you know?"

I leaned back, a bit in shock. Was this how it was going to be? Our *roommates* weighing in on our relationship …?

Johanna was nearby. I didn't think she'd be able to hear, but she rushed over and joined in. "*Thank you,* Larry, that's what I'm always trying to tell him. It's fine to do the carpentry thing *now,* but what about the future? What then?"

My eyes narrowed. I had the funny feeling that everyone around me knew a lot more about what was *really* going on in this

situation than I did.

I gave Johanna a look.

"What?" she snapped, still giggling.

"You mind if we talk?" I pulled her aside into a quieter corner. "What's this about? You've been acting weird all night and I just wanna know what's up, Jo."

"I hate the idea of you being a carpenter forever," she blurted out suddenly. "There. I said it."

"Wha'?" I stammered. "How? Why?"

"It feels like you don't have a future. Like *we* don't have a future. I spent all this time and money going to school so I can get a good job. But what about you? You're gonna just do carpentry forever? Only making 'okay' money and killing your body for it?"

"Umm – it's a good job, Johanna! You always need people to build things … and if I specialize in something in demand, I can really have a lot of success. Jake says I'm really–"

She cut me off. "I just never saw myself ending up with a carpenter."

"Jo …" I shook my head, bemused. "I can't believe you're even saying this!"

"Yeah, well, it's true. I feel like I don't even *know* you anymore. You're not the same person you were when I met you."

"You're right. I'm not." I stood upright. "I didn't have any confidence then, Jo. I didn't know who or what I was! My life's actually turned around since I started working with Jake …"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, and now he's *all* you wanna talk about. Jake this, Jake that. I can't stand it. I don't care about Jake and his stupid business! And it's like, that's all that ever goes on in your life anymore, you know? With my other friends, I talk about school and things. You just talk about *carpentry* and *Jake*."

I huffed and took a long breather to gather my thoughts. "So what are you saying?"

"I think you should go back to school."

"Okay, I get that. But what about *us*? What about Chicago?"

"Ethan, we get along *great.* I'm sure we'll be great roommates, too. But maybe we'd get along better if we were just friends. Maybe we should take some time to think about that?"

I shook my head. "So … you're proposing a break."

"Yeah."

"Break number five. Jeez." A long pause. "Alright. Fine. I guess I'll go home then."

"Okay." She shrugged. "I'm staying out with everyone else. Sooo … have a good night?"

"Yeah. You too."

I stepped outside the bar. The air was misty and cold and I raised my palms. A cold, wet sprinkle slicked my palm.

Zero percent chance of rain, huh? But I wasn't exactly feeling like it was time to celebrate. Instead I had a long walk back to Johanna's, just to get to my car, with the thunder rumbling in the distance and always coming nearer.

***

I had plenty of time to think where things had gone so wrong with Jo on the walk back to my car. It seemed like we always ended on a bad note, ever since our troubles began a few years ago – that we couldn't separate without *some* fight, some misunderstanding. Not a big, over-the-top emotional blow-out. But just a nasty disagreement that leaves us feeling like we're being pulled apart, at a fork in the road and being pulled in two different directions.

Some part of me knew – I'd been denying for far too long, but the 'magic' was long gone. That, in fact, the magic hadn't lasted all that long to begin with. Anytime I was in a miserable mood – like right now, as I trudged home in the rain – is when these thoughts actually surfaced and I could examine them. I could look at our relationship objectively and admit it to myself.

It's not working out.

And the idea of *moving* half-way across the country with this girl and our friends just seemed so extra terribly insane.

We'd already broken up four times, not counting this 'break.' Our relationship wasn't built on such a strong foundation anymore, and any simple disagreement felt like it could be catalyst for the next break-up. Each break-up was over smaller and smaller disagreements, after all.

If our relationship was a house? It'd be one of those 'tiny houses.' One that looked cute, and seemed like a real great idea, when we bought it. So we moved in with the few things we needed. And then, over the years, we got more and more stuff and it just didn't fit inside anymore. We had way too much stuff, piled high to the ceilings, and neither one of us wanted to admit it.

We couldn't live in this tiny little shack anymore – we were too boxed in, too suffocated – we just had to finally *admit it* to ourselves, to each other, and truly *mean* it. And not take it all back the next morning. No, what we had to do was call up the demolishing company, schedule the wrecking ball to come over, and smash the whole thing into dust.

It's over.

I didn't *get* Johanna. Truth be told? I don't get girls, period. But

Johanna had been the first girl to show some interest in me – my first girlfriend ever – and I felt like I *owed* it to her, or to myself, to put in a good, honest effort. Until it was well and truly *over.*

By the time I made it to her apartment, the rain was really coming down. Completely drenched and with a deep chill quivering my bones, I unlocked the door and jumped in. I was glad I'd only had one beer while we were out, because if I had anymore, I'd have to *sleep* in this thing over night – and I'm sure I would've caught a cold with my clothes all wet!

I started the car and looked at my cell phone while I let the engine warm up. I had a text. From … *Jake.* Whoa, that was a first. What's Jake doing texting, I wondered?

I opened it. His text read:

"*Old ass wives tale = 1, weather.com = 0. Ha. Hope you had a good night buddy. Gotta be honest, I'm still bummed as hell about the news.*"

I found myself staring at that text and reading it over and over, laughing to myself like a crazy person. Who knew *Jake* could actually text. And he didn't typo or do anything embarrassing!

Jake … I grinned, shaking my head. It was a nice thought that a guy like that would think of me when we weren't on the clock, that my work meant that much to him.

I knew I shouldn't think about it right now – because it was morbid as heck. But if me and Johanna decided that it was for the best if I didn't go to Chicago? If we split up after this break was over?

Well, obviously *some* good would come of it: I wouldn't have to leave Jake.

I pocketed my phone and drove home.

9

– Ethan –

Thankfully, my roommate John was asleep on the couch when I came home. Normally he's always up and awake and wants to know how my day was. John's really supportive – which is great – but telling him about my big setback with Johanna was *really* not high on my list of things to do right now. Even if I knew he'd be all "rah-rah, you're better than that!"

I snuck past him, tip-toeing quietly across the floor – even as bolts of lightning snaked across the sky, lighting the house as bright as

day, and giant thunder-cracks rattled the house.

It was kind of a miracle he even stayed asleep.

I went down the hall to my bedroom. After a long, hot shower to warm me up, I threw on a pair of boxers and climbed right under my fluffy comforter and tried to go right to sleep.

But I couldn't sleep – I didn't feel tired at all. And while I normally slept on my belly, trying that *now* didn't work. Because all my body weight was right on top of my member, and I guess it was feeling a little ornery, because all that pressure only made it uncomfortably hard.

I tried to ignore it. So I tossed and turned, trying out different positions. For what felt like hours. I listened as a barrage of rain pelted the roof, the thunder-clouds rolling right overhead.

I watched the hours roll by on my alarm clock. Waiting for my erection to get the hint and go away.

"Really, Ethan?" I mumbled to myself, kicking the comforter off my legs angrily. "You really have to do this? *Now*?"

Something about jerking it after your girlfriend breaks up with you for the bazillionth time seems kinda pitiful. But my cock had sent his message. He wouldn't be denied.

"*Fine,*" I groaned, angrily wrapping my hand around my heat.

"Oh," I gulped with surprise the second my fingers touched it. It tingled in response – the neurons in my brain *screaming* with reward, demanding I touch myself more.

"Damn." I grumbled, tugging my skin up and down my glans.

Why did this feel so good? I guessed it'd been a while since I jerked it … the days can add up pretty quickly when you're busy. And then, before you know it, you haven't jerked it for a week or more, and you can almost forget that thing is even down there. Even though it's popping up on you left and right, no matter where you are or what you're doing, trying to remind you of your urgent mission to *go spread your seed.*

"Jake's van," I gulped, suddenly remembering the embarrassing erection earlier today … and how close I came to getting caught.

My cock heaved in my hands as I remembered – and all those naughty visions of Jake and the client's daughter came right back to me.

I saw visions of Jake tearing his tattered, damp and sawdust-covered clothes off in a hurry. His sweaty muscles all reddened and swollen after our hard day's work. The girl didn't even *know* what to do with this much man. She just stared at him, awe-stricken.

"*We gotta be fast,*" I imagined Jake roaring, "*my apprentice is waiting.*"

Jake tore the daughter's clothes off just as fast. He mounted her and she screamed, cumming helplessly, as his thick, strong cock parted her folds and burrowed in with a hefty but graceful presence.

"Hell yeah, Jake," I muttered to myself as I tugged faster and harder. "You're so bad, dude."

I'd gotten *so* hard fantasizing about Jake nailing that girl. I knew it was totally inappropriate, especially after Johanna asked for a break. But … I couldn't help it, man. This was one hot fantasy.

I glanced down in the dark to see a bead of pre-cum appear at my tip and trickle down my shaft.

"Oh, man!" I grunted. That was a *lot* of pre-cum … more than I'd ever made in my whole life. I bet that if that girl had made *Jake* pre-cum like that, she would've slurped it right up.

I felt like some outside force possessed me. Something not quite me, something adventurous and curious as hell, took control of my hand. I gingerly scooped up my own nectar on the tip of my finger. I brought it up to my face, studying it between flashes of lightning. And then I did something crazy.

I put my finger between my lips and sucked it clean.

Oh. My. God.

I'd never done *that* before. My taste was surprisingly sweet and delicious – and the naughtiness of tasting my own spunk only made me that much hornier.

I dug my heels into the mattress, lifting my ass off the bed as I thrust my warmth into my fist. The mess of bedsheets, twisted around my ankles, only tightened as I worked myself higher into a frenzy. I had a funny thought that those bedsheets kept me grounded – otherwise I might've shot myself right into the air and off the bed.

"Hell yeah Jake!" I panted. My pelvis quaked and a rumbling rattled my legs. My cock bored in and out of my fist on its own volition, and I could only flail helplessly – like I was just along for the ride.

"Fuck!" I moaned as I beat myself even harder and faster. When you go *this* long without beating it? Any guy will tell you – every tug is better than the last. *Every* last one. Each stroke is like a pump, building a toe-curling pressure that makes your balls feel so heavy and achy, but in a damned good way. And that pressure wants to get out of you more than anything else.

"Ohhhh yeah!" I howled as I collapsed into the mattress, my hand flying up and down my member. An urgent pressure rumbled inside me, quickly escaping my balls and climbing higher. "I'm gonna fuckin' cum!"

Right before I came, I imagined that girl dropping to her knees below Jake. He came, blasting his big load right into her open mouth,

and she swallowed it all down … and I had a funny thought.

Since my pre-cum tasted so good, I wanna try the real thing. I wanna cum in my mouth.

The urge made me swallow shamefully. Oh God, that was naughty. And the taboo thought pushed me right over the edge.

"Unh!" I moaned, opening my mouth wide. I felt the soft patter of warm strands landing on my chest. Long and wet, they kept coming, splattering my torso and belly and reaching as high as my nipples. I couldn't quite reach my mouth.

"Oh yeah!" I whimpered, milking myself for every last drop.

I laid in my dark room, panting and breathless, as the after-glow washed over me. My senses slowly returned.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" I asked sullenly, repulsed by the weird desire that had gripped me just a few short seconds ago. Why would I ever want to taste my own cum? Talk about gross.

I cleaned up with a towel instead and rolled over, feeling tired at last. The steady *pit-pat* of rainfall, and the occasional rumble of thunder, helped lull me to sleep. The rain fell softer, lighter, the thunder growing more quiet as the storm passed us.

Before I fell asleep, I had a thought. *I can't tell Jake anything yet.* It was too early to tell him I wasn't going to Chicago. I had to wait and see what happened with Johanna first. Could I really live with my ex? Did I *want* to?

I *knew* I needed a change, after all … but what was it?

10

– Jake –

I picked up Ethan that Monday morning from his house, like usual.

"How was your weekend?" I asked in my tired and groggy voice.

"Ugh," Ethan shrugged.

"You too, huh?" I chuckled.

"What happened to *you?*" he asked.

"You got my text, right?"

He nodded.

"Okay. Well. A little while after I sent that text? A *giant* tree-branch snapped and fell on my roof. Right above Belen's bedroom.

Cracked the roof and everything. Water flooded in and seeped into the drywall. She woke up when her ceiling caved in and crashed right into the middle of her bedroom! Scared the crap outta her! She was so upset …"

"Holy shit, Jake!"

"Yeah. She was freaked out, man. And *I* had to climb up on the roof to put a tarp over the hole …"

"During a storm? Tell me you did *not,* Jake."

"I sure did. I had to! I can't let water rush past the roof deck like that!"

"That's dangerous, man, you could've got hit by lightning."

"What choice did I *have?* Anyway …" I slowed the van as I pulled into the client's house. The same client from last Friday. "How was your weekend?"

"Eh, I don't feel like getting into it." Ethan shrugged. "Maybe I'll tell ya later."

The client's daughter was the only person home again. She hung around, trying to get us to talk to her, but I just focused on my job. I thought Ethan would be making his usual wise-cracks, but he was really quiet instead.

We finished laying the hardwood flooring Monday morning, and then we patched up the wall we had to take down, painted, cut and installed trim and everything else. When we were done, Ethan took photos on his cell phone of our work. He always took before and after pictures of *every* job we did.

I used to ask him why he bothered, since those photos just stay on his phone. But his answer was always the same: "you never know."

I guess it wasn't a bad idea to have a portfolio of your work. But I already had a bunch of pictures of other jobs I'd done and didn't really think it was anything I had to keep track of. A big job, sure, why not! But Ethan documented *every* job. Kinda crazy if you ask me.

Anyway. By the time the day was over and the job was done, I realized that Ethan seemed to be quiet in general. Which is really weird for that kid, since his mouth is always runnin' nonstop.

"You alright, buddy?" I asked as I drove him back home.

He sniffed, but kept staring out his window. "Yeah."

"Okay." I shrugged, my eyes going back to the road. If someone didn't wanna talk, I wasn't about to make 'em.

The rest of the week, we worked on building a custom spiral staircase for a client in Parkside. That's a pretty upscale neighborhood, and they had a real fancy loft apartment with exposed wood everywhere. The spiral staircase led up to the loft. It came out looking amazing, and the client was really floored by how well it turned out. So that was a really great feeling, and pretty much what a guy like me

lives for.

Ethan usually loved those moments, too. And while I thought he was just a little moody Monday … his mood seemed to last all throughout the week. He was all quiet and forlorn. So when Friday came and went, and we finished up that spiral staircase, and Ethan hadn't cracked a *single* joke? And we hadn't poked fun at each other even one time that week? Well, I knew something was up.

"Hey buddy," I said while I drove him back home Friday evening. "Are you sure you're doing alright? You've not been yourself lately."

He sighed heavily. "Yeah. Yeah, I dunno. I'm just kinda confused about a lot of things."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Man." He sucked his cheeks and shuffled his feet. "I really don't wanna be a bother. Sometimes, you make a mistake, and it's like, you shouldn't punish other people for it. You know?"

"Uh." I chuckled. "No, I don't know what you're talking about."

"I don't wanna be a flake, you know? Other people have to like … live their lives and shit. I dunno."

"Dude. Ethan. You're not making sense right now."

I turned into his neighborhood. I drove real slow, on purpose, trying to give him plenty of time to get off his chest whatever it was that was bothering him.

He sighed heavily. "Okay. Uh. What if I told you …"

He trailed off. I had to chuckle at how much he was dragging this thing out.

"What if I told you, that I was just kidding when I said I was moving to Chicago?"

"Uh oh." I looked at him with my side-eyes. "What if I told you I already hired somebody else?"

"No." His eyes grew wide with shock. "No you didn't."

"Yeah, dude." I shrugged nonchalantly.

Ethan crossed his arms. "What's his name?"

"Alex."

Ethan scowled at me. "I hate him. I *hate* Alex." He forced an angry gust through his nostrils and turned his head away. "How could you?"

"Dude. You told me you were leaving. What choice did I have?"

"I'm so freakin' *pissed* right now, Jake. Did you meet this guy in person?"

"Yeah." I had to bite the inside of my cheeks to keep from laughing.

"Well, what's he look like?"

“Why do you care?”

“I dunno. Maybe I just wanna know everything about the little shit that's stealing my job.”

Try as I might, I couldn't hold it back anymore. I started to snigger. Ethan whipped his head around and stared at me, looking totally enraged as he realized I'd been pulling his leg.

“You *fucker!*” he yelled, and he punched me in the shoulder – real hard. Maybe even hard enough to leave a bruise.

“Ow!” I laughed. “Oh man, you should've seen your face, dude!”

“Fuck you!” He crossed his arms and pressed his back into his seat with a little attitude. He still looked pissed as hell, but I could tell he was starting to smile just a little bit.

“Had you goin', didn't I?”

“Yeah, Jake – dickhead!” He shook his head. “So you really didn't hire anybody yet?”

“Hell no,” I said. Ethan let out a big breath. He looked relieved. “I didn't even wanna *think* about hiring someone else, honestly. I had Belen all weekend and I wanted to enjoy that and … fuck man. So you and Johanna aren't going to Chicago after all?”

He grunted. “Hell if I know. Maybe I'll just stay and she can go without me. I really dunno what's gonna happen, Jake.”

“Whoa – hold on a sec. *What*?” I couldn't believe it. He'd been with Johanna since he started working with me! I thought they were gonna get married someday soon!

“Yeah. She dumped me. Actually, we're on a 'break.' Same difference if you ask me.”

“Oh. *Oh.* Shit, Ethan, I'm sorry. Here I am fucking with you, and you're probably heart-broken, and–”

“Nah.” He lifted his hand at me and gestured like, '*ey, whatcha gonna do, no big deal.*

“'Nah'? What do you mean, nah?”

Ethan chuckled cynically. “I mean, *nah.* I'm not heart-broken … at all! She's already broken up with me four times, Jake. This was number five. Kinda hard to be that torn up about it after that many times.”

“Whoa.” I swallowed. “I had no idea. I thought you two were little lovebirds.”

“Hardly.” He snorted. “I tried so hard to make it work. Sometimes, I don't even know why I bothered.”

“Damn.” I drove as slow as I could, crawling through his neighborhood, but I could only delay the inevitable for so long. His house came into view and I reluctantly turned into his driveway.

Ethan sighed. I didn't want him to go.

“You wanna talk about it?” I asked.

"I dunno. I don't wanna burden you with it. It's pretty heavy stuff."

"Shoot," I laughed. "You know I've been through divorce myself. You wanna talk about heavy break-ups … oh yeah. I had one alright. Believe me, I know what it's like when your heart's all heavy and you feel like you don't wanna bother anyone with your worries. I'm here for ya, buddy."

He looked at me and frowned. "Really? You mean it?"

"Yeah. 'Course." I clapped my hand on his knee. "Tell ya what. Why don't you come over to my place tomorrow? The weather's supposed to be beautiful. If it's warm enough maybe we can sit by the lake and fish a little. Have somethin' of a guy's day to ourselves. Plus," I winked. "I could use some help patchin' up that roof."

"Really?" He panted. "I'd love to help. And fishing sounds awesome. You have no idea how good that sounds. All my friends wanna do is … go out to the bars. I just wanna get away from everybody, not be around *more* people."

"Yeah. Sounds like you're up for an outing to my neck of the woods, alright."

"Dude. I'm so excited. I've always wanted to see your house …"

I laughed. "Why didn't you ever ask? I woulda had you over."

He shrugged. "I dunno. I guess I didn't wanna bother you. I figured you were probably too busy throwing redneck parties with all the other crazy hillbillies …"

"Well yeah – they're gonna be there too. We're gonna shoot some raccoons and roast 'em over the trash fire. Don't you wanna join us?" I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and shook him. "Little fucker. I see you're feeling more like yourself already."

Ethan grinned. He reached for the door handle. "Thanks Jake. I'll see ya tomorrow."

11

– Jake –

I woke up early the next day and tidied up the house a little bit. I hate to admit it, but I was feeling a little excited for Ethan to come over. My stomach was flittin' with a little case of the nerves. I hadn't felt this way in a long time.

But that worried me. Because when I invited Ethan over I made myself promise not to think about it like a date. 'Cause I know it's *not* that …

It's just two guys hanging out. Ethan is a straight guy, who happens to work for me, who just broke up with his girlfriend. And he's coming over to talk about things, or maybe to get his mind *off* things. Whichever. He just wants to have a good time and forget about the fact that things aren't working out with him and his ol' lady.

And if there's one thing that living out in the country is good for – well, hopefully it's that. He can come over and have a good time outdoors, just me and him, with nobody else around.

The day turned out to be even more beautiful than the weather-man predicted. For a day in the late winter, a guy can't ask for weather any better than the mid-60's. I threw on some shorts and a t-shirt for the first time since winter began.

I heard Ethan's car roll up around noon and I went out to greet him.

“Hey buddy.” I couldn't help but smile seeing him. Like always, I guess. I greeted him as he got out of his car, shook his hand, clapped my hand on his back, and pressed my shoulder into his in that half-hug thing that guys do.

“Hey Jake.” I'd never seen him in his *normal* clothes, only his work clothes. And who would've guessed it, but Ethan was quite a fancy dresser. He wore some kind of fashionable print t-shirt, and a nice pair of khaki shorts, and some stylish sneakers.

“Look at you!” I chuckled, looking at his outfit from head-to-toe.

“What?” he laughed self-consciously.

“I never knew you dressed like that.”

“And what a surprise that you dress just like you do on the job.” Ethan stuck his finger in one of the holes in my t-shirts, threatening to pull down and rip the hole open. That was a game we sometimes played on the job. Any hole in the clothing was fair game, as long as the work day was over.

“Don't you dare,” I growled, feeling the warm heat of his finger against my abs. I grabbed him by the wrist and carefully pulled his finger out from the hole. “I love this shirt.”

“Yeah, well, it's time to retire it. It's covered in holes, Jake.” He laughed. “Now gimme a tour of your house already.”

“Okay. But be warned.” I paused. “It's a piece of shit. And it doesn't reflect on me as a carpenter.”

I showed him through my old house, pointing out all the problem areas, construction mistakes, and features that badly needed work. He thought I was being too critical.

“It's not *that* bad, Jake. You just need to spend a little money to fix it up.”

“Too expensive. And the plan was never to fix it,” I shrugged. “I bought this place because of the land it came with. Got a great deal on it, mainly because the home owners knew the house was more trouble than it'd be worth.”

“So let's patch this bad-boy's roof up already, yeah?” Ethan cracked his knuckles.

I got out the ladder and some plywood and we climbed up onto the roof. We threw the boards over the hole in the roof and nailed 'em down. Not a fantastic job by any means, but this house … *sigh.* It'd have to do for now.

After the job was done, we headed back in for the fishing gear. I grabbed a six pack to take down to the lake with us. We loaded our arms up with fishing poles and a tackle box. I kicked the back patio screen door open and Ethan followed me through the backyard.

“So what *was* the plan for this house, if you weren't gonna fix it up?” Ethan asked.

“Well … me and my wife were gonna build a house and then demolish the old one. 'Course, after the divorce, money wasn't so great. And uh – well, it still isn't all that great. So I'm stuck in this old house hoping it stays together for a few more years … so I can buy enough time to build a new one already. Kinda running out of time, though. If I wait any longer I might have to just bite the bullet and patch things up. But then I'll be stuck there.”

“That's kinda sad,” Ethan frowned.

“What can ya do.” We made it to my lake. The air was nice and fresh, and with the sun overhead, we found the perfect spot to sit in. I had a set of lawn-chairs nearby just for relaxin' in while we fish, but me and Ethan both felt like sitting on the grassy bank instead. Maybe it was because the winter had felt so long, it felt nice to be able to sit our asses down on the grass again. The air was finally warm again, and smelled fresh and filled with all the promise that spring has to offer.

So we sat on the ground, our butts right on the plush, springy grass. We stretched our legs out, side-by-side, not minding the blades of grass scratching at our calves every time we moved. The sun was just hot enough on your arms and legs, that if you were lucky, you caught a whiff of that lovely sun-baked, salty skin smell. A small breeze picked up and rustled Ethan's playful locks of hair.

I gave Ethan his fishing pole. “Here ya go.”

“Right on.” Ethan stared at it for a moment. “Okay, um. Don't think I'm a pussy. Because I *swear* I've done this before. But I'm gonna need help remembering.”

I laughed. “I'm totally judging you right now, man.”

“Don't!” he joked, bumping his shoulder into mine. But in a way, his plead sounded kind of real, too.

“I'm just jokin' ya. Here. Look.” I held the reel close for him to see. “This here's the bail. Flip this over and the line goes slack – that's what you want when you cast. So put your finger on the line right here to hold it. Now when you cast, let your finger off the line, and –”

Ethan didn't need any more advising. He flicked the pole over his head and made a high, arcing cast that dropped far out into the center of the lake.

“There. See, I remembered.” He grinned.

“You got some good distance on that one. But you aren't gonna catch anything that far out. Try closer to the bank, or by those downed trees in the water over there.” I pointed at the Hackberry tree that had fallen from the bank and into the lake sometime last year. Those make awesome little hangouts for fish.

“Oh yeah! I remember now.” Ethan reeled back in and made another cast, this time aiming for the downed tree. His lure hit the water just a couple feet outside the tree.

“There you go. Perfect.” I nodded with approval. I twisted off the caps to two beer bottles and gave one to Ethan. “Here you go bud.”

He took the bottle from me, said thanks, and sipped his beer.

“You ever caught a fish before?” I asked.

“Nah. My Dad took me fishing when I was a kid, but I never had anything but a few nibbles. Never reeled one in.”

“Really?” I laughed. “Maybe today'll be your lucky day then.”

“Hope so.” He paused. “It's nice out here, man. If I lived out here? Oh hell yeah, this is what I'd do *every* day after work.”

“Yeah. It's pretty nice.”

I sipped my beer. I was the type of fisherman that liked to cast into the water and just watch and wait. I wasn't in a big hurry to get anywhere. Half the fun was being out here in the first place.

Ethan turned to me and suddenly looked serious. “I mean, the house isn't *great* but it's not that bad, either. But *this* – out here – is paradise.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So, uh. Did your wife like it out here?”

I chuckled. “Sure. But she wasn't around for too long after.”

Ethan pursed his lips and looked down. “Well what happened? Can I ask?”

I swallowed, my mind going a million miles a minute while I thought of what I might tell him. I thumbed the opening of my beer bottle. *Shit, what do I tell him?* I couldn't tell him the truth. I knew that

much, at least.

"Long story short, Ethan … we weren't happy together. As time went on, it was more and more obvious that we just weren't a good match together. I really tried to make it work, but – it just wasn't meant to be, you know?"

"Yeah, that sounds familiar, actually. It's like the *same* thing with me and Johanna. Even if we *do* get back together … what's the point?" Ethan made another picture-perfect cast. But the fish weren't biting today. Weather was too nice, maybe.

"So did you have a lot of big fights?" Ethan asked.

"No. Not at all. It was more like – we came to a realization. That we weren't a good fit for each other." I didn't know how else to say it. All I could do was repeat myself.

Ethan shook his head. "I don't get it. Like what?"

"Uh … okay …" I shifted uncomfortably on my side, wiggling my ass against the grass. "I hung out with my best friend a lot back then. And she was convinced that I had a thing for this friend. Now, it was true, I *was* really close to this friend …" I trailed off.

"Uh oh. You didn't *cheat* on her, did you?" Ethan gave me the stink-eye.

"No! Never. But …" I guiltily took a long draw from my beer bottle. "But, well, I guess it depends."

"Well what's that mean? Either you cheated on her or you didn't."

I grumbled. "I'm not really used to talking about it, Ethan. It's hard for me."

"Oh." Ethan bobbed his head humbly. "That's okay."

"Sorry." I frowned. *I wish I could tell ya. But I can't.*

"It's really alright."

I tilted my beer upright and let the rest of the liquid pour out of the bottle with a *glug-glug-glug* and go right down my throat. I felt like kicking myself.

I wiped my mouth dry with my fist. "You need another?"

"Sure."

I passed him a bottle.

"So how'd you meet Johanna?" I asked. I hoped maybe he'd feel better if he could talk about his life instead.

"Ha." Ethan reeled his line back in and made another quick cast out. "You want the long story or the Cliff's Notes?"

"Hell. We got plenty of time out here. Gimme the whole story."

12

– Ethan –

I love days like these. The weather's perfect, the sun's hot, the skies are clear. Two guys, just hangin' out by the lake, chatting about life, and throwing back a couple beers while we cast into the water. I hadn't gotten any bites on my line yet, but I was having such a good time just being outside and in the sun again, I didn't even notice. These are the moments I feel like I missed out on as a kid!

I was hoping Jake would tell me more about his marriage, since it seems like we were in kind of the same predicament. He says he really tried to make it work, but that it just wouldn't happen. Well – yeah. That's *literally* the story of me and Johanna's relationship.

I'm kind of hurting for advice, here. I want to talk to someone who can understand what I've been through.

"You want the long story or the Cliff's Notes?" I asked him. That's more of a warning than anything else. Because I want to tell him *every*thing. I feel like I can really get close to Jake. Maybe we could even be friends outside of work.

He said he wanted the whole story.

"Okay. You got it."

I took a deep breath and readied myself to spill it all.

***

I wasn't exactly a big hit with the ladies in high school. I had always been a bit of a quiet, shy kid, and meeting new people was hard. I loved hanging out with my guy friends – but as they got older, and they all got girlfriends, my friends were more and more obsessed with 'getting pussy.'

It was like their whole *lives* revolved around it. Ha! Well, that and sports. Whereas my life became more about computers and learning programming languages so I could make my own websites.

I wanted to fit in with the guys, of course, even if I didn't really feel that same all-consuming drive to 'get pussy.' I figured that I must have been too shy, too nervous. I thought maybe I'd know what to do once I got close enough to a girl. By junior year, my friends had all been to third base, or second base at least – but I hadn't even kissed a girl. A secret I kept *very* close to my vest.

I emerged from a happy cocoon of baby fat the summer before senior year of high school. Turns out, underneath those few extra pounds, was a guy that didn't look half-bad, I guess. When my senior year started, suddenly girls were looking at me and giggling to each other. That felt weird. It took a while for me to truly believe that they weren't laughing *at* me.

I remember the first time I started to realize things were changing. A popular blonde cheerleader had a locker next to mine. One day, during passing period, she randomly just started talking to me. As if we were friends. It was only small chat, never anything serious – but we we never had an introduction, no 'hey, I know we never talk, but we should!' Instead it was like … one day we were just talking to each other.

That had been so weird. But it was even weirder, when one day, she asked me out of the blue:

"So are you going to Drew's party tonight?"

I wasn't even sure I was *allowed* to go to a party. My Dad was incredibly strict, and boundaries like that weren't clearly defined – part of his iron-fist strictness was not explicitly telling me where the line was in the first place. So I always had to second-guess myself … or risk Dad's wrath.

But a *party* sure sounded like trouble, and Dad would probably ground me if he knew that that's where I'd been. If I asked Dad for permission to go to Drew's party? One thing was for sure – he'd call Drew's parents and make sure they *knew* their son was having a party. 'Cause that's the kind of Dad he was.

So what did I tell this cheerleader, who wanted to know if I was going to Drew's party?

"Um, I dunno," I lamely lied. After all, I already knew I wasn't gonna go.

"Well, you should," she bit her bottom lip, and pressed her text books against her chest in such a way that it pushed her cleavage up until it was spilling out of her spaghetti-strap tank top. Not an accident, I *knew,* but I still had trouble believing that it was for me. "… Because I broke up with Scott this week and I could use a little play."

I stared at her.

Play. Use a little play. The hell? You'd think it'd be great that girls were finally interested. But everyone else had years of experience on me already. I didn't even know how to *kiss* a girl. The panic of being a bad kisser filled me with dread. But play? I definitely didn't … know how to *play.* With a girl.

"Oh," I said matter-of-factly.

She sighed whimsically. "Well – I'll see you later. I hope." The ends of her blonde hair snapped in my face as she spun around and took off.

Play.

At lunch, I bragged to my friends about this encounter. I thought that I was finally gonna be considered a man, that they'd congratulate me and high-five me, all because a girl offered me some

'*play.*' Maybe that meant 'getting pussy' – I couldn't be totally sure. But I knew my friends would be proud.

… Except, they weren't. Not after they asked what time I was going to the party, or what I was gonna wear, and I hemmed and hawed. They stared at me like I had a penis growing out of my forehead while I tried to explain how my Dad would literally kill me and/or get Drew's party canceled, and then *no one* would get *any* play at all, and it'd all be my fault.

"You're not gonna go?!" "What the hell, Hotmail! Turn the computer off and go for once." "She just propositioned you, dude!" "Just sneak out … your parents will never know. Duh."

That was embarrassing. I'd been so proud, after all, that a girl had hit on me. I thought that had meant I'd 'made it,' that now I was truly one of the guys. And then it all backfired and blew up in my face and my friends just did *not* understand why I was not willing to crawl across red-hot coals and broken glass for a chance at some 'hot cheerleader pussy.'

That was pretty much how the rest of my year went, too. It didn't matter that girls were finally interested in me – I fumbled every pass, every flirt and come-on like nobody's business. There were *always* circumstances in the way, mind you, that made it not 'truly' my fault. But the end result was that I graduated high school a never-been-kissed virgin.

The next year, I went to University at Buffalo. And even though Buffalo was my hometown, living in the dorms felt like a completely new start, without all the history.

And the year started off great. I felt fresh, like a new man. I was making friends and branching out. I was *determined* to get some practice kissing – that was the first major barrier that I had to overcome.

One of the boys on my dorm wing, Steven, was gay. Steven was out and proud and that was cool – there weren't any openly gay guys at my high school, at least none that I knew of. I wondered if Steven had been out in high school, or if he was a *new man* in college, the way I felt?

I knew that Steven had a crush on me, because he always told me how handsome I was and what a great body I had. That felt really good, because no one had ever told me things like that before. I still had trouble believing it, but at least he seemed to think so.

One day Steven asked if I was straight. I told him the truth – "Yup."

I thought that might be the end of Steven hitting on me. But, it wasn't. He always had some funny little flirt or comment. The things that I found so hard to say and do to girls, he said and did to me. He

really cracked me up, trying to convince me to 'switch teams,' like he called it.

Here's how desperate I was to learn how to kiss. Some part of me hoped that Steven would press a little harder. Like, maybe one day he'd knock on my dorm room door, late at night, when no one else was around to see. I'm pretty sure I'd let him in. That was a *huge* thrill to think about, for some reason.

I'd only let him in for the kissing practice, of course – it was a win/win scenario. Duh. Girls hated bad kissers, after all. You had to know how to kiss them or you were basically worthless.

But as it turned out, I didn't need Steven to sneak to my room late at night. Because, a few weeks later, along came Johanna.

All the boys in the dorm wanted Johanna. She had *the* most amazing ass – that's what everyone said. They practically drooled over her and it seemed like wherever she went, a group of guys followed. Whether it was because they were harassing her and asking her out on dates, or because they were creepily slinking behind her just to stare at her butt just a little while longer.

Everyone chased her but me, that is. And so I stood out for that reason.

Maybe it was boring? The thought that she had her pick of the college's men. There was no thrilling pursuit, no push and pull or air of mystery – *does he like me? Does he not?* – that fuels so many relationships forward.

Whatever it was, my shyness attracted her like a moth to a flame. Unlike the other guys, I wasn't crass or rude to her, and my eyes weren't constantly going *straight* to her tits when she talked to me. I wasn't digging my fingers into her back with an unwanted massage the second she turned her back.

Later, she told me it was refreshing, even exhilarating – the thought that I was the *one* guy who didn't want her. So she was determined to make me want her.

Before long, she started coming by my dorm room. She'd invite herself in and sit on my bed and put herself in all sorts of compromising positions. Just testing me. Waiting to see if I'd jump and reveal my true colors – like all the other sleazes before me.

But it never happened. And that only made her more and more curious. One day she was determined to crack my shell. She sat as close as she could, gently bumped her legs against mine, and asked me all sorts of questions.

“So how many girls have you had sex with?”

“Umm.” I pressed the creases on the thighs of my jeans with my palms.

“Two?”

"Uhh."

"*One?*"

I pursed my lips.

"You're a virgin, aren't you?"

Slow, reluctant nod.

"I knew it." A satisfied smirk creased her lips. "Have you ever kissed a girl?"

A somber head-shake.

"Would you *like* to?"

"Y-yeah, I think so."

She leaned forward and pressed her lips into mine. I kissed her back. And that was my first kiss. Never needed Steven to sneak by in the middle of the night after all. Ha!

She said I wasn't bad, but that I needed to be more aggressive – and to emphasize the point she forced my hand under her shirt and made me squeeze her boob. My eyes widened as I cautiously touched a breast for the first time. It felt soft … and jiggly. But also kinda heavy.

Some guys might have taken that as free license to rip her jeans off and climb on top of her right then and there. But I didn't press for anything more.

And just like that, the next day, she showed up at my door again and started taking me around with her. I was like her shield. As long as I was with her, guys wouldn't harass her. They might instead point at me and snicker – I knew it, I could tell – but at least she felt safer with her man repellant at her side.

That's what she called me at first, before I'd earned the "boyfriend" label. Before I was officially her boyfriend, I was her *man repellant.* Ha.

So that was it. Months after arriving at University at Buffalo, I was 'a new man,' and I finally had a girlfriend. And then I could officially say that I'd kissed a girl. And a couple months later, I wasn't a virgin anymore, either.

Life was goin' pretty great, when you put it like that. But … really? Things felt stagnant, somehow. Like I'd been on the path I was supposed to be on, and then somewhere, somehow, went off-track. I wasn't sure what it was. Only that I felt like I was going back into my shell instead of coming out of it.

I ran into Steven in the hallway after I started dating Johanna – and Steven said that now he *believed* me that I was straight. Maybe he hadn't before. "Your girlfriend sure is a babe," he'd said. "Too bad, too bad."

Too bad, I chuckled to myself. Steven's disappointment really amused me for some reason.

But by the time the spring semester started, I wasn't sure about my college classes anymore. My grades were fine, but I was overwhelmed by a growing panic that I had *no idea* what to major in. Everyone said it didn't matter, just '*pick a major, any major!*' and go with it. Jobs would come beating down your door once you had that piece of paper in your hands, apparently. That's what everyone said, anyway.

By the end of freshman year, I was suffering anxiety attacks over the issue. I just could *not* figure out what I wanted to be.

***

"… And, well, you know the rest of the story," I chuckled. "That's the summer I met you. Once I started working for you, I never wanted to go back to school. That was the first time Johanna broke up with me. She said she didn't feel like she could relate to me anymore, since I wasn't in school."

"Damn," Jake muttered. "I had no idea."

"Yup."

"You know what's funny though?" Jake asked with a glint in his eye. "That's *exactly* why I hired you. Even though you were green as hell and didn't know a goddamn thing about carpentry … hell, you couldn't even read a tape measure!" Jake laughed.

I back-handed his chest with a slap. I was kind of surprised by how my hand just bounced right off his firm chest, like it'd been launched by a trampoline.

"I don't mean that as an insult." He playfully grabbed my neck and rattled me. His hand felt so big and warm, almost like he could span all his fingers around my neck. "I thought it was really mature of you. To try a new path. And really wise, that you were afraid of racking up more student loan debt when you didn't know what to study. I mean you've got *all* these kids graduating with tens of thousands of dollars in debt, who never give it a second thought … and they have no idea what they're gonna do either!"

I nodded. "Yeah. I didn't wanna end up trying to pay off those student loans while working at a restaurant."

"Yeah. Right. It takes a smart man, in my opinion, to break away from the herd and do something different. If you feel like something ain't right for you … don't do it. You know? That's a lesson I've been trying to learn my entire life."

"I guess, you and me both, then." I chuckled, taking another long pull from my beer until the last few droplets emptied in my mouth.

Jake wasn't gonna let me miss a beat. He had another bottle at

the ready and passed it off to me. “Oh, man,” I chuckled, but I took it anyway. This was number – what, three? Four? I was starting to lose count already. I don't drink too much and yeah, I'm a bit of a lightweight. But I didn't feel like turning him down, because I was having too good of a time. Besides. It's *guy's day*. Might as well get a little crazy.

“I would've thought you'd be a big lady killer in high school,” Jake said out of nowhere.

“What? Me? Haha!” I leaned back on my elbows and glanced at him. “Why the hell would you think that?”

“Hell, I dunno. You're personable. And likeable. You can talk about stuff.”

“Yeah but, the things I liked? My hobbies and interests? Girls weren't into. At *all.*” I chuckled to emphasize the point. “Trust me. No girls wanted to talk about the intricacies of Javascript, or when you should use PHP instead …”

Jake looked at me and blinked. There was *nothing* behind those eyes. Just a vacant stare.

“… *Yeah,* that's exactly how they looked at me when I opened my mouth …”

“Well shoot.” Jake laughed, looking away. “Don't talk about computers to girls, obviously.”

“You'd think it'd be that easy, right?” I laughed wistfully. “Anyway, if I could choose, I would much rather be like you – the strong and silent type. Girls find that *way* sexier over a guy like me who can't shutup and has an opinion on everything.”

Jake swallowed. “Don't be so hard on yourself. People are attracted to their opposites, right?”

“I guess,” I grinned at him. We were both lying back on our elbows now, soaking up the rays from the afternoon sun. It was so strong, I had half a mind to take off my shirt. I doubted Jake would mind.

“It's hot,” I said as I reached for the hem of my shirt. “And I wanna work on my tan.” I pulled my t-shirt off, bunched it up, and laid it under my head for a little makeshift pillow and laid back and gazed up at the clear blue sky. “Wow … it's beautiful.”

“Yeah. Sure is,” I heard Jake mumble. Then I heard him chug the rest of his beer. “You need another?”

“Dude, I just started working on this one. I'm waving the white flag, Jake, I can't keep up with you anymore.” I chuckled. Then I turned and looked at him and asked him quietly. “Do you always drink this much Jake?”

“No. Hardly ever, actually, only on special occasions.”

I felt a wave of relief. It would've killed me to find out that

Jake drank a lot. He works too hard to have a habit like that. A habit that could wreck everything he's working so hard on.

"That's good. Johanna and her friends drink almost every day. That's *another* thing I don't get about all those college kids, man … they were always ripping on me for actually *working*. Meanwhile, they're going out almost every single night, drinking until the bar closes! I mean what the hell!"

"Yeah," Jake mumbled. I couldn't help but notice he'd gone awful quiet suddenly.

"Something wrong?" I asked. The gentle breeze picked up again and rustled over my bare torso. I didn't have much in the way of chest hair, just a few sparse areas – like the soft treasure trail I had, or the tiny blonde hairs that circled my nipples – but I could feel those fine threads tingle as the wind mussed them and they fluttered in the breeze.

"No. Not at all." Jake cleared his throat. "I think I might join you. Work on my tan too I mean."

"Go right ahead, man." I peeked over and watched as Jake took his tattered shirt off. I'd only gotten glimpses of his build on the job, and I was curious to see if my idea of him could live up to reality.

Jesus, I thought to myself as I saw his chiseled upper body for the first time. He was even more jacked than I'd imagined. My throat went bone-dry as I stared at his thick bands of muscle.

"Damn, Jake. You're built like a God. And you're putting me to shame." I laughed, not caring how self-conscious I sounded. It was *true,* after all, he looked like a super-hero figure. His pecs were so chiseled and *perfect,* really. His abs textured like a washboard. Deeply cut v-lines that angled down from his taut belly to, … well, to where any girl would *love* to go.

He chuckled nervously. "I dunno what you mean."

"Don't worry about it," I rolled my eyes. "Just put your shirt back on."

"Uh." He looked at me wide-eyed. I saw the hint of an apology behind his big green eyes. That look melted away into a mild panic, and Jake quickly reached for the shirt he'd just tossed aside, scrambling to put it back on.

I laughed even harder and grabbed his meaty forearm to stop him. "I'm *kidding,* Jake! Holy crap, man! Who knew you were so sensitive?"

"Oh … uh. Right. Sorry. I'm a little tipsy, I guess."

"It's all good." I waved my hand, hoping to reset the conversation. "So. Now that I've told you my whole life story. Why don't you tell me the rest of your story, about how you got divorced?"

Jake took a deep breath.

13

– Jake –

Holy hell.

I don't drink much. Never, actually, I kinda hate the stuff and what it does to me. It makes my thinking, my judgment sloppy, and I get myself into trouble. I only picked up a case because Ethan was coming over and he's young and I know young kids always wanna drink.

But this hang-out was suddenly freaking me the fuck out.

When Ethan's shirt came off? Holy … *whoa.* Oh, man. His skin was so milky white, so soft and smooth. His skin looked like velvet.

He said he used to be a little heavier in high school. That was kind of a surprise, but I guess I could see it once he said it. He still had a little baby weight. His belly was flat and supple, but with a youthful doughiness that made my throat scratchy.

I knew there was only one way to itch that scratch – run my finger-tips over his belly, savoring his soft, smooth skin – but like hell *that* was gonna happen.

I didn't know if it's me, or if it's him, or if it's the beer or if it's some combination of all of the above. But I felt like he's *looking* at me. I felt like he already *knows* about my little secret, and he's just dancing around the topic to torture me. And that gets me so anxious and worked up, all I can do is toss back another brew so I don't have to think about it.

Yeah. Drinking so you don't have to think about your problems – any alcoholic will tell you what a great idea *that* is.

That story he told me? About wanting to let that gay guy from his dorm kiss him?

Uh. That's … that's the kind of shit *I* fantasized about. Back when I refused to admit it to myself.

Could it be? Could he really be curious?

That's when I started to get too excited – I started looking for signs in his face, in his behavior. But then I curse myself. And so I drink more. And that only makes the problem worse. Because the tipsier we get, the more I feel like all my suspicions are confirmed.

"You really wanna know about my divorce?" I asked.

"Sure do. I wanna hear about this mysterious best friend you

had." He chuckled. "'Cause whatever happened, it sounds kinda sexy and scandalous."

"Yeah," I nodded skittishly, "it was scandalous, alright."

"Oooh. Do tell."

"Okay. I guess it all started when Kristi started to feel neglected. I was working all the time …"

"Yeah, but you had to, didn't you? To get your business off the ground?"

"Sure. That was *part* of it. But I was working more than I needed to … I'd come home and immediately start working on some other project. And a big part of it was to get away from her."

"Oh, yeah, that'll piss a woman off, alright."

"Uh huh. And it was even worse that, when I had any free time at all, I hung out with my best friend instead."

"Yiiikes. Bet Kristi loved that."

"Yeah. Kristi got pretty jealous, and um. Well, after a while, she gave me permission to … experiment with my best friend."

"She did *what*?" Ethan laughed. "Oh *no,* Jake! That was a trap! I hope you didn't fall for it."

"No … it wasn't a trap. She's not into mind games, and I don't blame her at all, alright? I was really – a bad husband. And I didn't think I was capable of getting any better."

"Why?"

"I couldn't make her happy. Couldn't please her."

"You mean sexually? 'Cause I find *that* hard to believe." Ethan chortled. "A guy who works with his hands, I mean, c'mon!"

"No, I mean – emotionally. Because … I always had these *urges*, Ethan." I took a heavy breath, steeling myself. *Am I really gonna tell him this?*

"Urges like what?"

"To – to be with someone else. To be with this best friend of mine, for one. But I pushed these urges deep down. And I promised myself I'd never act on them, ever since I started feeling them. But you can only bottle something up for so long before it explodes."

"Right, but she gave you *permission* to hook up with your best friend, so what's the big deal?"

I sighed. *Just tell him.* My heart rocked my ribcage, pounding like the beating of war drums, *bang-BANG, bang-BANG, bang-BANG!,* leading me further down a path I wasn't sure I wanted to go. But it was too late to turn back now.

"Well, Ethan, the thing was – my best friend was a guy."

I closed my eyes and waited. What would he say? What would he do?

It seemed like an eternity before he could muster a reply.

"You serious?" he asked at last, his soft voice light and lilting.

My reply was firm, but gentle. "Yeah."

"Hold up." Ethan scrambled to sit up. "You're really *serious*?"

"Yeah."

"So you – you mean you're …?" He shook his head, as if he refused to believe it.

I took a deep breath. I'd already told him this much. I couldn't turn back now. I had to tell him everything.

14

– Ethan –

What. The. Fuck.

Gay. Jake just told me that he's gay. I think.

Right? Did that really just happen? Or did I seriously misinterpret something he said?

I mean I couldn't believe it. He *can't* be gay. It didn't make any sense.

"Wait, wait wait *wait,*" I stammered, shaking my head. "You're telling me you're gay? You're into *men*? Is that really what you're saying right now?"

"Uh." Jake gripped his beer bottle real tight between both hands. Part of me was worried he might squeeze the bottle so hard, the glass would shatter between his palms. "Yeah, that's pretty much what I'm saying."

I laughed. "That's impossible, dude."

"Why would that be impossible?" Jake chuckled, like he was a little amused, maybe a little worried too.

"Because you – you *can't* be gay. You've got a daughter."

Jake chuffed. "Gay guys can't reproduce? Is that something you believe? You think we're born shooting blanks or something?"

"Well – no, of course not – I just. I just … *whoa.*"

The manliest fucking man I know … the guy who I thought could get any woman he wanted … isn't even into women. Ha! Doesn't that just figure! God's got a sense of humor, alright.

"Sorry." Jake lowered his head. "I guess I thought you might have had a suspicion, I guess."

"Not at all," I blurted out.

"Shit. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything." He shook his head at himself, and I felt bad. I knew that my shock and surprise to his confession was a rejection, in a way, almost like a slap to the face.

"We don't have to talk about it anymore," he muttered.

"Umm." I laughed. "Yeah, *right.* Now you have to tell me. I'm still just – wow. I'm speechless, Jake! You're so – so manly and tough, I'm still having a hard time buying it."

Jake rolled his eyes. "Gee. Thanks a lot. Maybe I should wear mascara and eyeliner? Would that be more what you expect from a gay man?"

"Jake!" I slapped at his shoulder. "You know I didn't mean it like that. Sorry. I dunno what I meant, actually. Sometimes I say dumb things without even thinking."

"It's okay. Don't worry. Honestly, it was hard for me to accept, too. Still is, kinda."

"So …" I stretched out on the grass. My leg spasmed and jumped a few inches over the grass and closer to Jake's leg. I noticed – but I didn't pull my leg back, because I didn't want him to think I was grossed out by him or something. "So *did* you hook up with your best friend when your wife gave you permission?"

His brows arched and he stared into the lake. I could tell that my mere *asking* about that time of his life sent him hurtling right back into what had to be a very confusing, difficult time. His lip pulled the corner of his mouth up into a smile that wasn't much of a smile at all. More a look of pain.

"Yeah. The night she gave me permission. It happened."

"Jesus," I panted. *He didn't wait long, apparently.* He must've wanted it – another man – bad. I swallowed. A tingling chill rippled down my spine and my leg spasmed again, my foot kicking helplessly into the air. "I mean. Tell me more, Jake. I'm curious. I never really had any gay friends. At least, none that I could talk to like this."

"You sure? You're okay with it?"

"Yeah."

"Whew. Okay." He cleared his throat. "The thing is … if Kristi never gave me permission? I'd probably still be with her. Probably still be unhappy, too. I love that girl, don't get me wrong. But not in the way that a man loves a woman. I always had … a certain feeling toward boys when I was growing up. I loved playing outdoors with my guy friends more than anything. That's totally normal, right? For a young boy?"

"Sure." I nodded. "At least I think so."

"Me too. But then everyone hit puberty. Just like you said, all the boys suddenly became obsessed with 'getting pussy' … everyone was trying to get laid. And I didn't understand it. I just wanted to hang out with the guys. I was so bummed they were all moving on to women."

"Yeah," I agreed. And then a jolt hit me. *Wait a minute. What*

does that say about … me? Does Jake think I'm gay?

"I started dating Kristi my senior year of high school, hoping that'd make me feel more normal. And a year later, she was pregnant with our daughter. So we got married. Everyone was real happy for me, and I knew I should be happy, too. But some part of me just kept screaming … *is this really it?*"

I gulped. "Whoa."

"She saw how I got along with Trevor. My best friend. And she always said she was jealous of my friendship with him. How I became this 'other person' around him. This guy who was suddenly able to show his emotions more, I guess. It really didn't feel like I was doing anything different around him, but she swore up and down that I was. I kinda thought she was crazy."

"Then what?" I asked, totally hooked on his story.

"She reached the breaking point. She started saying things that made me think she was *really* crazy. That I might be into guys. I told her no way. Her words hurt. But even when those words struck at my core? Some part of my heart heard her. And it resonated with what she was saying. Like when you wet your fingers and rub them across the rim of a wine glass. My heart just went, *oooooooo!* But it was confusing as hell and I didn't want any part of it."

I swallowed. "So … how then?"

"She gave me permission to experiment with guys. I laughed until my belly hurt, told her she was nuts. She said she was going to stay at her parents' place to give me space. I couldn't believe it! I called Trevor up, told him to bring a bottle of whiskey, because I'd just had a bad fight with Kristi and she left."

Uh oh, I thought. *A bottle of whiskey? I bet I know how the rest of this story goes.*

"So, uh, Trevor came over, and we started drinking, just downing glass after glass of whiskey. He wanted to know what we fought about. I didn't wanna tell him. I thought it was so goddamn embarrassing. He asked and asked and asked and all I told him at first was that we just didn't see eye to eye anymore. Until that bottle was gone. And then, finally, I told him … I said … "*can you believe it, dude? She's jealous of you. She even gave me permission to experiment with you! How crazy, right?*"

"And then what?" I asked, panting for breath. My heart had quickened its pace and I didn't know what had gotten into me, but I *needed* to know the rest of this story.

"He laughed. His cheeks were so rosy and flushed from the whiskey. And I remember just looking at his lips. And thinking … man. They look so soft and swollen."

"Oh," I sighed softly.

"And then he – he stepped closer to me. Put his hand on my waist. It was a different feeling. A man's hand, big and strong. His thick fingers dug into my side, grabbed hold of me so I couldn't run off. I'd only ever felt the gentle touch of a woman. This was something else. Something so powerful, you felt drawn to it, to its seduction."

"Oh god," I quietly whispered under my breath.

"And he put his lips to my ear, his stubble against my neck, and growled in my ear, something like … *C'mon Jake. You mean to tell me you can't feel our connection? You're not a little curious? She gave you permission, you know.*"

I felt a stirring between my thighs. I knew it was happening again – that I was getting hard. I also knew that if I thought about how I *didn't* want it to happen, that would only make me harder. So I pretended like it wasn't there.

"And that's when his lips met mine. And we kissed. And uh. Clothes came off. Real fast. Long story short, he stayed the night. And Kristi came back in the morning to pick up some things and found us in bed in the morning."

"Holy shit."

"Yep. She didn't even make a big deal out of it. She just said, 'I knew it.' And that's the story of how I got divorced."

"Whoa. Dude. Jake."

"Yeah, buddy?" He took his eyes off the lake and looked over at me. His green eyes looked so soft and gentle and I could see the lake, and the blue sky, reflected in them.

"That's … crazy."

That's kinda fucking hot, is what I wanted to say. 'Course, I couldn't say that. Or else he might think I was gay, too. When, really, *any* story about lovers can be hot – you know? It doesn't mean you're gay.

Then again, if he looked down at my crotch? That might give him reason to believe I'm gay, too. Because my cock just kept thickening. It managed to pump down one leg of my shorts, uncomfortably stuffed against my inner-thigh until it *clearly* stood out. I rolled my eyes at myself. *Always hard in embarrassing situations.*

"Did you – did you fuck him? That night?" I asked. My jaw fell open when those words came out of my mouth. I couldn't believe I'd just asked *that* question. Who asks that?

"No." Jake looked at me and chuckled, amused that I had the balls to ask that question. "I definitely wasn't ready for that. But … we sucked each other off a few times."

"Oh my *God.*" I'd never thought of two guys together like that. The effect it had on me was like the strongest wine ever – made my head woozy, made me feel lost and confused.

This whole time, I'd held my fishing pole steady between my thighs, waiting for a fish to bite – but now there was something else between my legs. My shameful arousal. I closed my thighs on it and rubbed my hard member, back and forth, against the handle of the fishing pole. *Oh yeah,* that felt good. My eyes were shut, lost in my decadent, naughty urges, and I almost forgot Jake was even there with me until he interrupted.

"Um." Jake chuckled. "I dunno what you're doin', Ethan, but … you should probably stop. Unless you're *tryin*' to make me hard."

I gulped. I knew that last part begged the question: *Did* I want to make him hard?

Oh. No. Of *course* not. Ha!

"Oh, shit, sorry Jake." I felt a spurt of hot embarrassment rush into my cheeks. I couldn't even explain what had happened to me, so I wasn't gonna try. "So what happened between you and Trevor?"

Jake looked back into the lake and shook his head mournfully. "We were like two goddamn tornadoes on a warpath, man. We were a terrible mix – especially at that point in my life, with all the shit I was going through. Every time we got together, we drank, fought, and fucked. Not always in that order."

"Whoa."

"Yeah. He's kinda like me. A big boy. So it wasn't pretty when we fought. 'Cause neither of us wanted to back down."

"Holy shit. Like two bulls going at it."

"Yeah."

"What would you even fight about?"

Jake shrugged. "Anything. Everything. I guess the main problem was that I wanted somethin' more, and he only saw us as fuck-buddies. He started seeing a girl, too, and that really made things worse."

"*Wha*'?" I gasped. How could a guy go back to a girl after an experience like that?

"Yup. That really pissed me off. 'Cause for a while, I blamed him for what happened in my life. And then he went back to normal, just dating girls like it wasn't a big deal at all. Meanwhile he kept wanting to hook up with me like it wasn't a big deal that he had a girlfriend." Jake chuckled and shook his head. "He's married to one now. We weren't meant to be, okay? That's the gist of it."

"Yeah. I see that now."

"And in the end, I'm the one that gets left behind. Kinda funny I guess, eh."

I was quiet. I waited to see if Jake had anything else to say, but he was quiet, too. He seemed lost in thought. Maybe a little sad. I hoped I hadn't made him take a regretful stroll down memory lane,

that I hadn't ruined his mood or his day.

"Do you still love him?" I asked, fearful of the answer for some reason.

"I still love everyone." He chuckled.

"What's that mean?"

"I have no idea. It's just how I feel. Kristi, Trevor – I can't be mad at the people that I opened parts of my heart up to. Sometimes I think the meaning of life is just to learn to love. But if you're asking if I miss Trevor, or if I'd ever go back to him? The answer is no, alright. I've learned that lesson and I've moved on."

Something inside me clicked when he said that. That's how I felt about Johanna, I realized. I loved her, I'd always love some part of her, but I wasn't *in* love with her. I was ready to move on. To see what else life had to teach me.

15

– Ethan –

I fell quiet again. So did Jake. We listened to the playful splash and tinkle of the lake water as the breeze pushed little waves against the bank. The small crests broke on the bank, one after another, and the lake sucked the wave back in with a *gulp* and a *slosh,* leaving a frothy ring of bubbles in its wake.

A long silence came between us. I listened to the cut of the wind as it whisked through the leaf-less trees, only now sprouting their buds for the spring. It sounded like the Earth was breathing in, exhaling. Then I realized Jake and I were inhaling and exhaling with the wind, too. Who was leading who, I wondered?

Slowly, I turned my head and looked over at Jake. He turned and looked at me at the same time. I felt like I saw Jake for the first time – really, *saw* him. Not just as a skilled carpenter, not my boss, my co-worker, or even friend.

But … the gentle side of Jake. The misunderstood side. The side that he kept to himself all those years. The side of himself that he wouldn't let anyone see for so long – including himself.

His green eyes looked so clear, so pure, and I knew if I wasn't careful I might stare into them too long. I had to look away. I looked down. His stubble, always present, framed his lips. There was a thin, almost vanishingly-small line around his lips where there was no stubble. Just a pure, pristine outline that drew attention to his rosy,

thick lips.

"Ethan," he whispered, and I knew his voice begged for a response.

My heart was heavy, my breath fast. I could tell something funny was happening. He wasn't moving forward, and neither was I, but the space between us was truly shrinking. Was it *really?* Was I imagining it?

"Uh oh," I grumbled, deep in my throat.

The thought that Jake wanted a *kiss* from me filled me with a terribly confusing, but equally delicious, taboo. One that tempted me to give him just what he wanted – if only to bask in the heat of that forbidden desire.

My manhood thumped between my legs, my heart-beat echoing through it with every powerful throb as Jake's lips crawled through space and time, nearing ever closer to mine.

This is wrong! My deeply in-grained social programming screamed at me. *If you kiss a man, that means you're gay!*

I remembered what I told Jake about Steven, that gay boy in the dorms during my freshman year. How I would've kissed him for the practice if he'd only pressed harder. Well, I didn't need the practice anymore. But I was open to the idea of kissing a man before … why not now?

Why not Jake?

Jake walked his hand across the grass between us. Slowly, it inched closer, coming for my bare torso. I stared at his lips, mine already yielding, waiting for his embrace.

Oh my God it's going to happen. I don't know if I want this.

But I was afraid to let Jake down. So I closed my eyes and waited. I'd let him touch his lips against mine, and see that it wasn't what I wanted …

I waited. I heard him near. I felt the heat of his breath against my face as he got closer.

I don't want this, I don't want this! Somebody stop this from happening!

And then I felt a *tug-tug-tug* between my thighs.

Tug-tug-tug.

My eyes shot open. "Holy shit!" I yelled. *Tug-tug-tug.*

"What? What?" Jake shouted.

I sat up and grabbed the quaking fishing pole from between my thighs. The end of the pole bowed dramatically, pointing its tip toward the water. "I got one! I got one, Jake! What do I do!"

Jake chuckled, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and finger. "Just reel it in. Nice and easy. No hurry. Don't fight 'em."

“Okay.” I reeled the fish in like Jake said. When the fish felt like he wanted to fight and thrash, I let him, but as soon as he tuckered out I started reeling again.

I felt this strange, bittersweet letdown. On one hand, I got my wish – and the fish had interrupted things. I didn't have to kiss to Jake.

On the other hand? I felt the same way you do when your friends are trying really hard to convince you to go with them to some outing. And you're tired, and you're cranky, and it doesn't sound fun to you. So you say no, I don't wanna go! And everyone tries to convince you to go but you stick to your guns. No way in hell you're going.

So they finally give up. They throw up their hands and say fine, you win, suit yourself. Have fun by yourself tonight.

And then you watch from the window as they go outside, climb into their cars and drive away. Leaving you all alone to yourself. You know you've got your way, but it doesn't feel good, there's no payoff. Instead, your stomach turns with that awful, crushing disappointment. You wanna call your friends back up and say, *come back! Take me back! I don't wanna be alone!*

… but you can't. Because something gets in the way. Pride stops you.

I reeled my fish in. His tail slapped at the water once or twice as I got him closer. He was tired now, and I reeled him in the rest of the way. I brought him in and pulled him out of the water.

“Nice fish, buddy,” Jake said.

“What kind is it?” I asked, looking at the fish with sparkly, green and white stripes that dangled from my line.

“That's a large-mouth bass. About a two-pounder.” Jake showed me how to hold the fish by the jaw with my thumb. Then he chuckled. “Okay, there's a rule out here on Lake Thompson about catching the first fish of the day.”

“What's that?” I asked, wide-eyed. “I hope you're not gonna say I have to gut him and clean him myself …”

“Nah, we're gonna let him go.”

“*Whew,*” I sighed.

“But you gotta kiss him first.”

“Yeah right,” I laughed. But Jake didn't look like he was joking. “Wait a minute. You're serious? You want me to kiss this fuckin' *fish,* Jake?”

Jake nodded with a sly grin.

“Kiss him *where?*”

Jake shrugged. “On the cheek, or his side … wherever.”

“Why the hell would anyone do that?”

"Well, it started because I wanted Belen to have respect for the fish we caught."

"Oh. Well. Did it work?"

"I don't think she needed the lesson, but yeah. She's really into it, actually. She says everyone who catches a fish has to kiss him. A rule's a rule, buddy."

I grimaced. "Man. I respect the fish just fine. Do I really have to kiss it?"

Jake chuckled. "Yeah."

"You first. Show me how it's done." I held the fish up to Jake. He closed his eyes and puckered. "Okay … here it comes."

I raised the fish closer to his lips. But the thought of that fish's slimy scales on Jake's lips was too much. They'd be tainted, ruined. I couldn't let it happen.

Jake leaned forward, trying to press his pouted lips into that fish, but I pulled the bass away and pressed *my* lips into his.

Jake's eyes shot open in surprise. His lips had been a stiff ring, locked tight to prevent anything from getting in – I guess that's the only way anyone would ever kiss a fish – but when I touched my mouth to his, his lips gave way and parted. His wet, warm lips squeezed mine gently, hugged mine with a tender embrace.

I gasped. The prickly stubble around his mouth was a harsh contrast to the soft fullness of his lips. An odd sensation. One I hadn't felt before. One that felt curiously … *masculine.* I reached up and touched his cheek with my hand. I glided my hands down his jaw, with the grain of his whiskers. And then back up – against the grain – his stubble like sandpaper grating at my skin.

That ruined me. I whimpered right into his mouth. My lips softened, wilting like a morning flower in the sun, as Jake kissed me harder, hungrier, wanting more and more of me.

"Wait," I gasped.

He pulled back.

"The fish," I said, holding it up as a reminder. "I'm letting him go."

'Cause I'm not gonna kiss you with fish lips, I thought to myself.

Jake grinned. "Okay."

"Thanks, little guy," I said to the fish as I gently put him back in his element. "You were the first fish I ever caught."

I couldn't even watch him swim away before Jake tackled me to the ground. My back hit the grass and the air whooshed right out of my lungs, *oof!* Jake had a wild look in his eye, and I knew right then what it was to make love to him – he was a wild man. The strong and silent type. Once you got them in bed, they finally let it *all* out.

"Jake!" I gasped, my diaphragm constricting tight for air.

He straddled me, his heavy weight pleasantly pressing all over me. He cupped my face with his big hands. I smelled him, his scent, his essence, emanating from those hands and swirling right into my nostrils – making me drunk on his smell.

"Oh God, Jake!" I wrapped my legs around his back and squeezed. I pulled him closer, needing the space between us to vanish.

I'd never had anyone on top of me, not like *this.* When a man is with a woman, he feels like he's the *push,* and she's the *pull*. But lying vulnerable, on my back, with my legs wrapped around this powerful man? With Jake between my thighs, his hands pawing at my belly, traipsing up my side, his lips passionately sliding against mine?

I knew that wasn't the case now – that I wasn't the *push* anymore. No – I was the pull. Jake was the bee, and I was the flower – and he wanted my nectar.

What a feeling. What a god damned feeling. His power, his desire, his *lust* washing over me. It was up to *me* to accept him or deny him. I could feel every last bit of his focus, his desire, of *him* – lavished over my body, begging for my approval, for permission to enter.

He *wanted* me. And I realized in that moment that no one had ever wanted me before – not like this. No. Not even close.

I squeezed my legs against him, pulled him closer. His taut tummy rubbed against mine. I felt his carved abs, each muscle squared off into its own neat little package, gliding against my soft belly. I raised my hands, pressed them into his clenched abdomen, pushing back against him as he rocked against me.

Then I felt something else. A hardness in his shorts.

His hardness found mine. *God,* he was big – of course he was – and his piston slid against mine.

"Oh god!" I panted as our packages rubbed against one another. He pushed forward, and backward, thrusting his cock wildly like a bull tossing its horns – but never missing his target, always battering my manhood with hard glances.

I shrieked, my moans reaching higher and higher – but Jake silenced me with his long, deep kisses, his wet kisses soulful and urgent and chaotic but always leaving me wanting more. He knew it. He gave me his tongue, passing it between my lips and searching into my mouth.

The taste of his tongue was so purely *him.* His taste, his smell conjured a thousand images and memories, all racing through my mind at once – me and Jake, in his van, catching a whiff of his manly, salty scent after a long, sweaty day. And I whimpered right into his mouth again, my body quivering under the oppressive weight of Jake's muscled torso.

“You're so hard,” Jake growled. His hands reached between my legs. He passed his palm over my throbbing manhood and stroked me.

“Fuck, Jake,” I whimpered.

And then I felt his hands reach higher. They pawed at my waistband. He grabbed the corner of my waistband, tugged, worked it free. The button popped loose, and my cock surged upward, freed from the pressure. Jake pulled my zipper down.

“Oh god,” I moaned softly.

I was torn, mired in a never-ending battle inside my head. *No no no,* one part of me screamed. That part of me grabbed hold of Jake's thick, meaty forearm and squeezed in a warning. Jake yielded and searched my face for a hint.

Yes yes yes, another part of me screamed. That part of me reached out, with my other hand, and pressed my palm against his straining abs. When his eyes met mine, looking for a sign if he should stop or proceed, my hand went even lower. I stroked *his* hardness, that solid shape between his thighs.

Wow. I was sending Jake mixed messages. I knew it, and I couldn't even stop it. 'Cause I didn't even know what I wanted.

Jake grinned, like he could read my face. Tentatively he pushed on. My hand was still locked on his forearm, but I didn't try to stop him as he pulled my zipper down. I might have even guided him.

“Jake …” I whimpered.

“Just close your eyes and relax.” His voice was gentle, reassuring.

I gulped.

“No one else is around. No one has to know. It's just me and you out here, buddy.”

I shivered. “Yeah,” I agreed, my voice wavering, and shut my eyes at last.

16

– Jake –

Holy shit. I didn't know how it got to this point. One minute we were shootin' the shit, talking about girlfriends and loves lost and then I started blabberin' too much. I was certain I said too much. That I scared him off forever.

But he had a look in his eye. A curious look. Those quick, sneaky glances down at my lips. I knew that look, I knew just what was going through his mind. I'd been there myself all those years ago.

Once I started telling him about Trevor … the story I hadn't told a single other soul? It all came pouring out. I didn't mean to tell him so much. But he didn't jump back, he didn't call me a freak or a faggot or anything ugly like that. He didn't try to run away or change the subject.

No – instead, he uh, he actually … he started to get hard.

And I think I saw it happen before he even realized it. At first I wasn't sure. His shorts just looked … *thicker* in the leg. On *one* leg, mind you. And then it pumped fatter and thicker. Until I knew it – he was getting hard, hearing my story about Trevor.

Dude. How fucking surreal. I was telling my apprentice that I was gay and he was getting *hard* over it.

Then one thing led to another, and we were about to kiss, and then he caught that fish … and then?

And then I was on top of him. Pumping and grinding my cock against his. He was squirming under me, writhing against me, pushing back against me with his hands tight against my abs. He was hard as *fuck* and I couldn't wait to see his cock.

I couldn't believe it. All those years of forcing myself not to think of him … not allowing myself to think of him. 'Cause he was straight, and my employee. And now we were both realizing that maybe he wasn't so straight.

I hooked my fingers under his waistband and pulled. He whimpered softly – sounded like he said "no." I paused and looked up, to see if he *really* said no or if I just imagined it. But he didn't say a word in protest, he just laid there with his eyes shut. In fact he lifted his butt off the ground. So I slid his shorts lower, pulled 'em off his hips and flung them aside.

Then he only had his boxers on. Staring at his hardness, I had to swallow again and again – my mouth watered like crazy. I was so thirsty for *him.* I wanted him in my mouth, to show him just how well a man can please another man.

I knew I'd had too many beers. I kinda hated myself for it, because it meant I couldn't be *totally* sure I was reading this situation right. If I was stone-cold sober, would I be pulling my apprentice's shorts off by my lake, under the afternoon sun?

Fuck, I'd sure like to think so. But a man can get awfully ahead of himself when he gets a little drink in him.

I kissed his nipples, such cute little round things like tawny rosebuds, as I slid my palm up and down the bulge in his boxers. He kept panting and moaning, his wet lips sliding right down my neck as

he struggled to catch his breath.

He whispered the sweetest little nothings under his breath.

"Oh, Jake … it feels so good, Jake … I can't believe how hard I am …"

I gripped his manhood over his boxers and tugged. His whole body jerked up and down with my strokes. Kid was electric. Shivering and panting and moaning and I knew he was gonna cum *real* hard once I got him there.

I couldn't wait any longer. I slid my finger-tips down his soft, pale belly. My fingers snuck under the waistband of his boxers. But right as I went to grab onto his member?

"*Wait.*"

I gasped and squeezed my eyes shut. I already knew. It was the worst case scenario. I'd pushed him too far, too fast, and he wasn't ready for any of it.

Fuck. I'm such an idiot.

I gritted my teeth and looked up at him, shame in my eyes. *Fuck.*

"Yeah?" I mumbled.

"We can't be doing this, Jake." He shook his head. *Fuck.* His cheeks were already pink and flushed, his lips red and swollen – his face said he wanted it, but I knew it wasn't that simple. His head said he wasn't.

"Fuck," I grunted. I pulled my hand right out of his boxers real fast. "Shit. Sorry."

"I'm sorry Jake."

"No, no," I shook my head. An unbearable guilt and shame, like sunlight focused through a magnifying lens, burned hot on my forehead. "Don't be sorry. I'm the fuckin' idiot. Shouldn't have done that. *Fuck.*"

Ethan grabbed his shorts and pulled them up. He had to wiggle his bottom to get his pumped-up member to fit inside. Then he put his shirt on, too.

"Jake … it's just … I'm confused. Okay?"

"I know." I swallowed. "Sorry I – took advantage of you like that."

"You didn't …" I appreciated that he wasn't *trying* to make me feel worse than I already did, but he didn't exactly sound confident in his own words. "Look, Jake. We – we work together. And I don't wanna fuck our working relationship up."

I nodded, trying to hide the stabbing pangs of my own self-loathing. "Yeah."

God. How lame. How lame did I feel at that moment – when my *apprentice* has to be the professional one. When he has to do the

thinking for me. Embarrassing. Utterly embarrassing.

"And besides … um … you know. Me and Johanna are just on a *break*. I don't know how things are gonna turn out, alright? She still wants me to go to Chicago even if we break up! Everyone's pulling me in a thousand different directions and I dunno which way to go!"

I looked at him cock-eyed. He couldn't be serious. Was he really still considering going back to that chick? Or worse, *living* with her after they broke up? But whatever, it wasn't my place to say.

I shrugged. "Oh … right. Yeah, I get that."

"So. Um. You know. We don't have to talk about this. Going forward. You know."

"Okay. Yeah. That's … probably for the best, yeah."

I cleared my throat. I wanted to crawl into a hole and die. But, if we were going to move forward and still have a working relationship, that option was pretty much off the table.

And since I stupidly gave Ethan beer after beer, I knew he needed time to sober up. As much as I was *sure* he wanted to hop in his car and drive off and be alone right now, I knew he couldn't. He wasn't safe to drive. We had to hang out for a while longer until he was good to go.

Ethan must've had the same thought. He turned his half-full bottle upside down and poured the beer into the grass. "If I'm gonna drive back home, I probably shouldn't have any more of these, either."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Let's switch to water then." I put the drink cooler between us and we each took a bottle of water.

I sniffed and stared into the lake. Then I grabbed my fishing pole and made a cast. Ethan followed my lead.

And so we didn't say a word. Not a single word. The only sound we made was the hiss of our spools when we made a cast, the satisfying *plunk* as our lures dropped into the water, and the mechanical cranking of our reels as we pulled 'em back in.

At first I felt like a piece of shit. Rejection will do that to a man. You feel like you're not good enough. You're worthless. If you'd only done X and Y differently, then maybe you would've had a shot.

But then you get over feeling sorry for yourself – and you start to get angry.

Because really, *how dare he?* How he could let things get that far that we were kissing and groping and clothes were coming off if he didn't want it? *He* kissed me *first,* after all! Maybe I should've reminded him of that fact when he started acting all 'concerned' about our business relationship!

And so here we were, sitting in awkward silence, forced to spend time together until he sobered up.

Hisssssss … plunk! … crank crank crank crank.

I dunno how much time went by. How long we were out there. Sitting side by side, not talking to each other, even with a huge storm cloud of fucked up emotions swirling all around us. Must've been a while.

But soon the sun went below the trees, and it got cold enough that we agreed that it was time to pack things up.

"I'll get out of your hair," Ethan said. "Just lemme grab another drink of water from inside."

"Sure."

17

– Ethan –

Ugh.

How the fuck did I get into this mess?

I *know,* in my heart and in my soul, that I'm not going back to Johanna. It's over between us. She wants me to be something I'm not. But just because my relationship is over does *not* mean I'm ready to have a guy suck my dick. I mean, what the fuck!

At the same time, I couldn't believe how hard I was – I couldn't believe how much I loved the stiff, hard pass of his cock boring against mine every time he pumped his pelvis against mine. I'd never had my legs tossed up like that – never had anybody hook their hands under my knees and throw me into missionary and mount me.

But having Jake do it to me was …

Whoa.

That's all I could say. And it frightened the fuck out of me.

What if he wanted more? What if he expected me to flip over on all fours, and fuck him, right then and there? Fuck him doggy-style by the lake? I didn't know how gay hook-ups I work. I didn't know what the fuck was expected of me. I don't think I could *ever* have one of those go … inside me.

It was a lousy excuse – telling Jake that we couldn't go any further. Because I might get back with Johanna. When *obviously* that wasn't happening.

Eye-roll.

That was so lame. *Such* a bad excuse. And I wouldn't blame Jake if he called me out on it. I wouldn't blame him if he decided he hated me. I wouldn't even blame him if he fired me.

We sat in silence, fishing the afternoon away, not daring to say a word. It killed me – what I'd done to him. He wasn't the same ever since I turned him down. I was sure I hurt him, no matter how much he acted otherwise. But what else could I do?

We couldn't do anything but sit and wait for my buzz to pass, so I could drive home. At last, we packed everything up and started marching back to the house.

"Hnggh!" Jake groaned as I walked behind him. He staggered and almost fell over. His hand went up to his head, and he squeezed his temples between his big hands.

"Jake!" I yelled. I ran up to him and wrapped my arms around his barrel of a chest and tried to hold him upright. But he was a pretty heavy guy, and I could only do so much – if he was going down, I couldn't stop him. "You alright?"

Thankfully, after a couple moments, he managed to catch himself.

"Look at me, Jake." He looked me in the eye. I could tell his head was spinning, since his eyes couldn't hold still.

"Jake, man, what the fuck." An anxious worry bubbled in the pit of my heart. "Something's not right with you lately."

"I dunno. It's just these bad head rushes I've been having."

"Yeah, but what if it's something else?"

"It's not. We just sat for too long. It happens when I sit in one place for too long."

I shook my head at him, my lips pouting. He shrugged and walked off to the house.

Fucking Jake, I thought. *So goddamn 'macho' he'll just march his way right to his grave.*

"C'mon, Ethan, come get your water."

I followed him inside. Got myself a glass of water and chugged it. I wasn't drunk anymore, but I sure felt dehydrated.

At the kitchen table was something I hadn't noticed before. A kid's three-ring binder. Curious, I opened it and flipped through the pages.

Page after page of drawings done by a young kid – but a talented kid. I knew it had to be Jake's daughter, Belen.

She was really into drawing houses – what I knew was supposed to the country house Jake always talked about building. Belen drew the facade, the side, the back – everything. She'd drawn the outside, too, with her giant garden and everything. Complete with the types of plants and flowers she wanted to grow.

I kept flipping through. Floor plans for the house.

"This is Belen's?" I asked, pointing.

"Oh," Jake chuckled softly. "Yeah."

"Dude. She's *really* talented. I'm blown away by this."

"She's a smart kid. Must've got it from her Mom." He grinned. First time I'd seen him grin since everything went wrong. That warmed my heart a little, at least.

"No way," I shook my head. "I mean, I don't know Kristi, I'm sure she's smart. But I can totally see *you* in her work, too. This is nuts. How old is she again?"

"Nine."

"*Dude!*" I laughed. "Unreal."

Jake shrugged. "Yeah. Sometimes I worry she's too smart … for her own good. She's just reaching the age where kids are starting to notice. And they're making her feel bad about it."

I sighed. "Fuck, man. Kids are mean."

"Yeah, they can be."

"I'd like to meet her someday," I said. I nodded my head with conviction, because I really *meant* it. I'd never cared for kids before but I really wanted to meet Jake's daughter for some reason.

He laughed like I was crazy. "Yeah, okay."

"I'm serious."

He looked at me with side-eyes and shook his head. "Well. Who knows. Maybe someday."

I could tell Jake didn't believe me, and I realized he had every right not to. And I knew he had every right not to want to introduce me to his daughter if he wanted. He was her Dad, after all. Who the heck was I? Just some idiot kid. Some idiot kid who made a really awkward situation for everyone … and now wanted to make it even more awkward for everyone.

"Okay, well uh, I should get going."

I stuck my hand out for Jake to shake. He looked at it, chuckled quietly, and shook my hand.

It's like I can't stop making things worse.

"Bye Jake."

"See ya." He kept his gaze low. "Pick ya up Monday morning."

"Thanks."

***

By the time I made it home, it was starting to get dark. My roommate was on the couch watching TV when I came in.

"Hey man," he said. "You look like you got some sun. Where ya been?"

"Just went fishing at my friend's house." I walked around the couch and made my way down the hallway to my room. "Tired now. Gonna lay in bed. Later."

He laughed. “Alrighty.”

Normally I'd stay and hang out. But after the day I'd been through, I needed some time alone.

Jake had been so much to me – a boss, a mentor, a teacher, even a *friend.* His influence in my life was huge. I looked up to him. I wanted to *be* him sometimes.

Jake had thrown me so many goddamn curve balls in one day, though. After our hangout session today, I found out that Jake was *gay.* And more than that, Jake apparently wanted to do things … with *me.*

But even if I *was* gay. Which I'm not. I don't think. Would it really be wise, to threaten everything we had? Just to experiment a little?

I climbed onto my bed, carefully crawling so I didn't move around too fast. You see … I had a little bit of a problem.

A swelling, crushing, blunt ache that stretched from the bottom of my nut-sack all the way into my gut. *Blue balls.* Get yourself excited enough, and *don't* blow off your steam, and … all that seed gets jammed up in your nuts, turning them into a veritable pressure chamber.

Blue balls are just a fact of life for a guy. You've got a responsibility, an obligation to fulfill, with your member. If you let it get that hard, that excited, thinking it's gonna get to blow its load – but instead, you crash the party and the needle lifts off the record with a screech and you don't let it cum? Well! Get ready to pay the price, bucko.

Blue balls are kind of amazing, too. I bet the masochist types really *love* having blue balls. They hurt so damn bad … but in a way that's kind of awesome despite the pain. Because your nuts are full of seed. Seed that was ready to come shooting out. But cruelly, you didn't let it out, and that seed gets all backed up, begging for relief.

I kicked my clothes off right away and climbed under my bedsheets. My cock was still half-hard, and the second I touched it, a sickeningly sweet wave of relief urged me on.

I pulled myself a little harder, my manhood filling up in my hands. “Yeah,” I grunted.

I guess I don't have to tell you what images filled my mind. It wasn't Johanna, or any other girl.

Nah. Of course not. Not after the day I'd had. It was Jake, of course. Absolutely. Me and Jake, sitting outside his lake.

I imagined how things might have gone. If I wasn't so concerned about the things that could get in the way. Like what other people would think. Or what *I* would think. Or what could happen to me and Jake's working relationship.

What if all of that didn't exist, I wondered?

What if time froze. What if time froze and it was just me and Jake by that lake. Two guys who happened to … be able to open themselves up to each other in a way that most guys aren't.

Was that really so wrong?

Here's how things would've gone differently.

I would've let Jake take my boxers off. Oh hell yeah. And then his mouth would've found my member. Like I said, I was already so close to cumming, I don't think I would've lasted long. A thought went flying through my head: *That's part of why I stopped him too.* I gasped. Was that really true?

Jake's lips would lock around my head, already pumped up and turning purple from my pounding arousal. I'd feel the grass between my fingers as I grip at the Earth to stay grounded. I'd feel the hot, soft, wet smoothness of his mouth, his cheeks. His tongue, slithering sensuously down my heat as he pushed me deeper.

My pelvis would rise, thrusting off the dirt, as I came way too prematurely. “Oh god, Jake!” I'd pant, busting in his mouth.

The thought of doing that in Jake's mouth made me do it for real.

“Ow, goddamn, fuck!” I panted, tugging my stiffness, with my oh-so-sore swollen and stiff balls bouncing and crashing into each other.

“Hnnngh!” I moaned.

Splat, splat, splat.

Too tired to move, I sat and stared at the ceiling, not caring about the puddle of cum drizzled all over my belly and chest.

All I could think was – *that was fucking hot.* And, *I totally am hard for Jake.*

This was a fork in the road – I could see it clearly now. Chicago was one path. *Jake* was another. One path scared the crap out of me and made me think I wasn't being honest to myself, or to anyone else.

The other path – well, it also scared the crap out of me. But in a fun, exciting way. Where you wanna take it just to see what comes next.

I pulled out my cell phone. I tapped out a message and sent a text. To Johanna.

“Hey. Been thinking about it. Let's not bother with the break. Honestly, it'd probably be better if I didn't go with you guys to Chicago.”

Sending that text was like a ten-ton weight being lifted from my shoulders. I *giggled,* for God's sake. I felt … *free.* Free to be myself – or find out who I was.

One thing I wasn't, was the guy that was gonna make Johanna happy. I wasn't ever gonna move to Chicago and go to school and become this big time lawyer, or whatever she hoped I might be. That just wasn't me. And it would kill me if I tried to fake it.

Then I started calling Jake. Why?, I dunno. I just wanted to hear his voice. I wanted to thank him for having me over and apologize to him for making him feel bad, and I hoped he wouldn't be mad at me.

But Jake didn't answer. I called and called and called, but no answer.

I gave him half an hour to call back. Then a whole hour. He never answered, never called back.

I started to get worried. I got dressed and threw on my shoes. I'd go see him if I had to. I just couldn't handle him being mad or upset with me.

18

– Jake –

After Ethan left, I sat around wallowing in disgust. My heart beat so hard in my chest. I felt my blood, thick and sticky, squirt through my arteries, pounding with my heart's shame and guilt. It was an awful feeling.

Once I came to terms with who I was? I swore up and down that I'd never do anything like that. That I'd never … throw myself on another man. Unless I knew he was gay – and knew he wanted me in that same way.

There was too much at stake otherwise.

And what did I do? Oh, only threw myself at my straight apprentice. Even if he wasn't totally straight – maybe he's just a little bi or something – he clearly wasn't ready for what I did.

And now he's probably gonna quit. Because how could he ever work with me after what I just did? What a whirlwind. I'm back at square one, needing a new apprentice. Or just give up the business entirely. Which ever.

I picked up my cell phone. I did something else I swore I'd never do again. Hey, I already fell off the wagon – what's another one

gonna do to me? Might as well live it up.

I deleted his number long ago – but I never could erase it from my mind. I punched in his cell phone number.

Please don't answer, please don't answer, the rational part of my brain said.

One ring. Two rings. Three rings –

"Hello?"

I gulped. My stomach dropped. I didn't even know what to say.

"Hello? Hello?" he repeated, and then silence, and I knew he was about to hang up.

"Wait. Trevor. It's me."

Long silence. Was he still there?

"… Jake? Jake Thompson?"

"Yeah," I grunted.

He laughed. "The hell do you want?"

I swallowed. *That's a damned good question.*

"Just wanted to know … what you're up to."

"I think you know damn well what I'm up to, Jake."

"Oh." My mouth was so dry, I smacked my tongue around a few times. "Yeah."

"So what is it *really*?"

"You wanna – you wanna hang out?" I croaked. "I just wanna see you."

Another long silence. Followed by muffled laughter. "You know I'm *married* now, Jake."

"Yeah. I know."

"To a *woman*."

"Uh huh."

"So now that fact doesn't bother you anymore, huh?"

"Forget it," I grumbled. "This was stupid. Forget I called."

"Wait! Jak–"

I turned my phone off, ripped out the battery and threw the goddamn thing on the floor. Had an urge to stomp it into pieces, before I realized how bad for business that'd be.

Instead I fell into the couch with a sigh.

***

It wasn't long before I heard the tell-tale crunch of gravel as tires rolled up my driveway.

Uh oh, I thought. *Who could that be.*

I went and looked out the window. I felt my stomach drop, but my heart race. It was Trevor's truck.

I went to the front door and waited. The truck door opened

and sure enough, Trevor climbed out. He straightened his long-sleeved shirt, making sure it was tucked properly into his jeans. His denim jeans were tight on his long, muscled legs. Those jeans were tucked into his cowboy boots.

He stepped to the door and knocked. I opened it and greeted him, standing in the doorway.

"Trevor."

"Jake. What's up. I think we lost our connection? Your line went dead and I kept calling you and it'd go straight to voicemail."

"Oh." I rolled my eyes. *Yeah. That's what happened.*

Trevor looked at me. I could swear I saw pity in those eyes. He chuckled. "So, you gonna invite me in so we can talk, or what?"

"Um." I blinked. I was still thinking it over. At last I stepped away. "Yeah."

"You look good," he said as he stepped in. "Got those hard biceps still, huh." He put his hands around my muscle and squeezed. I didn't like it. He felt like an intruder.

I hadn't seen him in years. He was still fit. Still handsome, but in an odd way. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Plastic is the word that came to mind. Not that he looked like he had work done. But that he didn't look like himself anymore. Skin too perfect. Cheeks too soft, too smooth. Eyes too sparkly. Not the Trevor I remembered.

"You look good too," I said. My guts flopped in protest.

Trevor walked himself through my house, looking at how things had changed. "Well, you're definitely not the decorator Kristi was."

"Great. Thanks."

He stepped into the kitchen and saw my phone lying on the ground, with the battery several feet away. "Oh. I guess that's why our call died, huh."

I groaned.

"Jake. I know why you called."

I sniffed. "Yeah? You do?"

"It's been a *long* time, Jake." He stepped closer and closer. Until he was standing in my personal space. I felt a charge between us – but not a good one. Instead I felt like my barrier wanted to push his away.

"How's married life?" I asked flatly.

He chuckled. "I think you know well enough how it is, Jake."

I shook my head. "I made a mistake calling you, Trev."

"But I'm glad you did."

He stepped even closer. His hand reached out for my side. I batted it away.

“Seriously, Trev, don't.”

“Why not?”

“'Cause I told you I made a fuckin' mistake calling you.”

He reached out for me again. I batted his hand away, but he grabbed my side with his other hand and squeezed.

Unh, I sighed, that half of my body going limp in his grip.

Even if we were a fucking terrible match? Even if I wanted to knock him out? Well … somehow that only made it worse. The way I melted in his hands.

“You *love* it, Jake, don't pretend.”

“Yeah, maybe. But I *hate* you.” I stared him dead in the eyes, my hands on his forearm, digging my nails into his skin enough that I knew it had to hurt him.

“That's why it's so hot, right?” Trevor winked.

“You're a fuckin' cheater, dude. You have a wife at home.”

“So?” he laughed. “We're *men,* Jake. I never wanted to *date* you. No woman knows how to please us like we can please each other.”

“Fuck off. If that's the way you felt you never should've married one.”

“Pot, meet kettle.”

“I ain't been with a woman since you came along, pal. *Big* difference there.”

Trevor laughed again. “Look. We haven't seen each other in a real long time. And we're already starting off on the wrong foot. What do you say we try this again?” He stuck out his hand for me to shake and sarcastically added, “*Hi, so good to see you again, Jake.*”

I sighed, staring at his hand. After a couple beats, I put my hand to his and we shook, each squeezing the other's hand like we wanted to crush it.

"Why don't you invite me to sit on the couch with you?"

"Fine," I grumbled. "Come on. Let's sit."

"So tell me, Jake. What's new with you?"

I told him how things were going. How business wasn't doing so great. How my apprentice was going to leave me because of his girlfriend, but then maybe not after all. I tried to keep details light. I didn't want to say anything more about it, but Trevor perked right up hearing it.

"Ooh. An *apprentice.* That sounds sexy, Jake. Bet he's young, isn't he? Is he your type?"

"Oh, fuck off, Trev." I punched his shoulder. Hard. Hoped to leave a bruise. Maybe his wife would see it and ask him what it was from. The fucker.

"Hmph. Given your defensiveness, I'd say I hit the nail on the head." He rubbed his shoulder. "So how old is your little boy-toy cum slut?"

"He ain't a *boy-toy cum slut,* whatever the fuck that is, alright? He's 22."

Trevor bit his lip. "God *damn,* 22 … oh yeah …" Trevor rubbed his palm over his crotch, his eyes rolling back in his head. "That's a sexy age. Reminds me of when me and you had our fun."

"Don't be a fuckin' freak, Trev."

"So tell me what happened. Obviously *some*thing happened, for you to call me."

"Yeah. I uh." I fidgeted with my hands. "I tried to kiss him."

"And?"

"He let me … and then I tried for more. I got his shorts off and everything. But he stopped me just before I blew him."

Trevor breathed heavily. I could tell he was getting excited from the details. "Man. C'mon. More details. How big was he? What happened?"

I shook my head. "This isn't Penthouse, man, I'm not telling you this to get you hard."

"Well why *are* you telling me?"

"Fuck if I know," I growled. "Maybe because I'm going through some hard times over here? Maybe because I thought you'd listen? Hell, you're the only person I know I could talk to about it."

"Aww, poor lonely ol' Jake." Trevor grinned. The damn guy had a mouth-watering firmness in the crotch of his jeans. One he wouldn't stop playing with, rubbing his palms up and down.

"Dude. C'mon. Stop that."

"Why?" He chuckled. He reached across the couch, aiming for my lap.

I knocked his hand away. "'Cause you decided to get married,

remember? I can't be part of that, man. That's fucked up."

"Jake … my wife is perfect – she keeps my life running smoothly. And I thank her *very much* for that, and all the lovely meals she makes me." He paused and tried to reach for me again. I slapped his hand away once more. "But she can't satisfy me like a man can. Eating pussy is alright, but it's *nothing* like sucking a cock."

"Tch. You're awful."

"And you're *delusional*. You never could see that you could've had it all – if only you learned how to manage it better. Don't you think all this would be better," he gestured around at my house, "if you still had Kristi taking care of it for you? And we could have our fun in secret? But no, you're *Jake Thompson,* the man who wears his heart on his sleeve and has to be honest and pure and full of conviction and do right by everybody …"

"Fuck you."

He reached out for me again. I batted his hands away harder. He got angry and fought back. We struggled with each other, jumping off the couch and tussling with each other. Suddenly his arms were at my elbows, and he dug his heels into the ground and spun, like he were throwing a shotput, only it was me he threw – up against the wall.

My back hit the wall and a beast-like groan escaped me, the wind knocked right out of my lungs.

He pressed himself against me, his hands reaching between my thighs. "I *know* what gets you hard Jakey-Jake. I know how rough you like it."

"No," I growled, and pushed him back. We grappled but I got the best of him, put him in a headlock and took him down on the floor. I straddled him, my hands pinning his arms to the floor.

His face was red and he panted. He looked at my mouth, his lip curling at the corner with anticipation. I knew he wanted me to kiss him. In the past, this is just how it went between us – and I *would* have kissed him back then. And we would've been at each other's throats all night, fucking and screaming our lungs out.

But I wasn't that man anymore.

"This isn't what I want, Trevor. I told you I made a mistake calling you, alright."

His face twisted into disappointment. "Fuck off, Jake!" I felt his member, a hard, thick presence under my ass. I had to resist the urge to grind my butt up and down it … 'cause I *knew* what that'd do to me. "I know you want it!"

"Like hell I do. Not with a married man. I want love, Trevor, the real fucking thing."

"You're a *pussy,* Jake Thompson."

"'Kay. Great. I'm a pussy." I rolled my eyes. "Just go, alright?"

I got off Trevor, let his arms go. He got up, his clothes disheveled, his face red and flushed – a mix of passion and rage. He dusted off his shoulders. "You really serious?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck you, Jake."

I heard the sound of another car rolling up my gravel driveway as Trevor made his way to the door.

Oh God, who could this be? I wondered.

Trevor sauntered out the door just as Ethan popped through it. Trevor stared my apprentice down angrily as he passed.

I heard Trevor whisper, "*slut,*" under his breath as the two men passed.

I rubbed my forehead, mortified.

19

– Ethan –

"Um," I pointed over my shoulder at the strange man who just mean-mugged me and, uh, also called me a *slut?* "Who the hell was *that,* Jake?"

Jake looked all red and worn out and was gasping for air, just like his friend. The wheels in my head started to turn. Was he … one of Jake's lovers?

"Oh, God!" I shouted, embarrassed. "That's your boyfriend isn't it! I feel so stupid! I oughtta go!"

"Wait, wait!" Jake grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back to his couch. "Please, man, sit. This day is getting *so* fucked up for me. I don't want it to get worse. Just – please, sit."

I sat, my head reeling. "Jake … who *was* that …"

"That was … Trevor."

"*Trevor*? You mean you still hook up with him?" A sour nausea spilled into my stomach. "Are you really that hard up for ass, Jake? Is that all you want?"

"No, that's not – that's not what I want at all."

"Then find your ass somewhere *else,* Jake. Don't lower yourself to that."

Jake chuffed. "Yeah, alright. Thanks. Believe me, I know."

"I can't believe it. After all you told me about the non-stop

fights you had with him."

I took a quick survey of his house. There obviously *had* been a fight – chairs overturned, pillows and blankets from the couch strewn everywhere, a big hole in the drywall that wasn't there a few hours earlier.

I clicked my tongue. "Wow. Old habits die hard, I guess."

Shame on me for thinking Jake would be any different than all the other crazies, I guess. He was just as bad as anyone else. As clueless as the rest of us. Not some heroic mentor.

Jake clamped his hand against his temples and squeezed. He groaned like he was in pain.

"Ethan … why are you even here right now?"

"Um." The truth felt ridiculous now. It felt like *another* mistake. "Well, I tried calling you, for one, but you didn't answer."

"But *why.*" He put his arm out on the kitchen table to hold himself up.

I swallowed. "I just … wanted to tell you that I broke it off with Johanna. Super officially."

He chuckled. "Okay. Came kinda far out to tell me that."

I rolled my eyes. *Yeah, I sure did. Try putting it together in your head.*

"So, like, I'll still be your apprentice for sure."

He blinked at me with heavy eyelids. "That's good."

"And …" I sighed. "Fuck, Jake, you're not making this any easier on me."

"Yeah, well, I dunno what you're getting at. I already made an ass out of myself earlier and I'm not about to do it again." His breathing was shallow and fast. Like he couldn't catch his breath.

A perturbed heat rushed into my cheeks. I balled my fists and my nostrils flared. I couldn't believe it.

"I came *all the way* out here because you wouldn't answer your fuckin' phone, Jake."

He looked at me like I was nuts. I was ready to rant.

"I had to swallow a *lot* of my own goddamn self pride and worries and all this other shit to even *think* about coming over here to talk to you."

I took a step toward him angrily.

"Whoa," Jake mumbled, watching me lose my temper for the first time in his life. "And then I come over here and find you about to rumble with your fuckin' UFC boyfriend. Is that what you want? You want me to lose my shit and start breaking things? Is that the way you prefer to communicate? Okay then, *fine!*"

I picked up Jake's lamp and tore the cord out of the wall. I held that lamp high over my head, ready to throw it at the ground and

bust it.

"Dude, don't break that, buddy! That was my Mom's, and her Mom's before that. She loved that lamp before she passed."

"Oh. Shit." I set the lamp down gently and looked around for something else to break. I pointed at an end table with a few coasters on it. "Can I break this?"

Jake groaned. "Yeah. Sure. It's from IKEA."

"*Hiyyaaaa*!" I stomped my leg onto the table and smashed the cheap thing into pieces. I stood over the mess I made, feeling kinda ridiculous, but hopefully having made my point. "There! Now how do you feel?"

Jake's eyes darted left and right. He looked pale as hell. He looked like he was gasping for words, struggling to speak.

Shit. Maybe it really hurt him to lose that table, too?

"Dude, are you feeling okay, Jake?"

"I'm … dizzy."

I got worried. Jake's vision seemed to go right through me. I had an impulse to run up to him – and I did just in time. Because a second later, Jake went limp, like a wet noodle, and fell. I wrapped my arms around him and helped him down to the ground.

"Jake!" I cried. "Jake, man! What's wrong!"

He didn't reply. He just went limp and pale and his eyes rolled back in his head. My heart pounded in my chest, freaked the hell out that I was gonna lose him.

But Jake came to just a few seconds later, and I rushed him out to the car.

"C'mon, I'm taking you to the hospital!"

***

Hours later.

I was on one side of Jake's bed, the doctor on the other.

"It's nothing serious," the doctor told us. "His blood pressure is too high and it's got to come down, or he's going to have problems in the future. He seems to have been dehydrated. That, coupled with his blood pressure, is most likely what caused him to black out."

"Well, we *were* out in the sun drinking all day …" I admitted.

"Yeah, that'll certainly help do it." The doctor nodded. "How's his diet?"

Jake groaned. "I'm right here, y'know. I'm not dead. You can ask me."

"Okay. How's your diet, Mr. Thompson?" the doctor asked.

"It's *fine*," he said indignantly. He scowled at the doctor, protecting his dirty little secret.

"Um," I cleared my throat. "Can I just say something? He eats pretty unhealthily, actually. Nothing home-made. Lots of frozen and canned foods, meat, and fast food."

"That'll have to change," the doctor scribbled some notes. Jake grunted in protest and gave me a look like I'd betrayed him. The doctor saw what Jake was doing, and turned to threats instead. "*Or* we can prescribe you to some blood pressure medications that you'll have to take the rest of your life. Or, you know, you can keep living like you have been and suffer a heart attack by age 40."

Jake's eyes widened. "… Oh."

I shook my head at Jake. "See? This is what I've been telling you all along, man."

"Last thing," the doctor added, "is less stress in your life."

"Well no chance of that happening," Jake shook his head. "That's all life is, right? One big ball of stress?"

"Oh dear." The doctor chuckled.

"He's just in a surly mood today, doctor. He's not normally like this."

"Alright. Well, you're free to go."

I drove Jake back home. I knew he was embarrassed by the whole episode, but I didn't care. I was glad I was around to help him. Who *knows* how much worse he would've got if I didn't catch it in time.

"You made me look like a total putz in front of that doctor, Ethan!" Jake whined.

"Are you seriously complaining? You *heard* what he said, right? Heart attack by 40?"

He groaned and crossed his arms. "Man."

"You gotta change your lifestyle, Jake."

"What's the point?"

"I dunno … to stay healthy so you can live your goddamn life, maybe? So you can take care of your daughter who you love so much? And run the business you're so proud of?"

"Yeah," he grumbled after a long pause. "I know. You're right. I'm just cranky."

We drove further from the city, the lights disappearing in the rear-view mirror, as I made my way back out to Jake's house.

Jake was quiet. Still, I could feel his aura of shame and embarrassment swirling around the car. If he had it his way he probably would've gladly dropped over dead in his house, too proud to go to the hospital.

I didn't care. I didn't think it made him *weak* to need help, not at all. I was just glad to have been there to help.

"I guess you were right," he said at long last.

"About what?"

"I'm as healthy as a horse on the way to the glue factory."

"Aww." I stifled a laugh. It was rare to see Jake feeling so down on himself. As much as it wrenched at my heart, it was kinda funny to hear him be so over-dramatic. I knew it wouldn't last. "You're gonna be fine, man. As long as you change your eating habits. I'll start making two lunches, one for you to have."

"Oh God." Jake mumbled. "As long as you don't make me have one of those –"

"And don't worry, I'll have a smoothie for you too. Garlic, pineapple, ginger, orange, spinach, blueberry … all the super foods I can fit …"

"Oh *no*." Jake panted sarcastically. We both cracked up.

"But seriously, how do you feel now?" I asked.

"Fine. Totally fine. The second they put that IV in my arm, I felt great. And I'm not just saying that because I'm stubborn."

I nodded. "Good."

"Listen, Ethan. About Trevor."

"I don't need to know," I shook my head. "Your life is your life."

"No … I want you to know. That's the first time I've seen him in years. It was a mistake calling him, and I even hung up once I realized it was a mistake. But he showed up at my house anyway. I didn't want him to. I was just torn up about – about what I did to you. And I wanted someone to talk to. Someone who could understand. But that guy – he disgusts me. He'd cheat on his wife just like that. It's all a big game to him."

"Ugh," I said, squeezing the wheel between my fist. "Nothin' pisses me off more than cheating."

"Tell me about it. Me too."

I saw an opportunity, a clear lane in front of me. *This is your chance, Ethan,* something inside me said. *Take it.*

"And that's why I had to make sure Johanna knew we were over."

"Huh?" Jake turned to me and blinked.

I nodded. "Yeah."

Jake gulped. "O-kay."

I wasn't sure if he knew what I meant. But we'd gotten to his house, and I pulled into his driveway and shut the car off.

"You – you wanna come in for a bit?" Jake asked.

"Yeah. I'd love to."

"Alright."

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– Jake –

I unlocked the door and went back inside, Ethan trailing behind me.

What a day. What a weird fuckin' day, I thought, ripping the hospital bracelet off my arm and chucking it in the trash.

"So um." I didn't know what to say.

I had an *idea* what Ethan meant, a suspicion why he might want to come in with me. Then again, I'd had one earlier, and all my suspicions seemed to do was get me into trouble. So I wasn't about to risk it by taking anymore.

Ethan kept his hands behind his back, standing with his feet crossed one over another, shyly keeping his gaze low.

I wasn't sure what to do. I *wanted* to walk up to him and take him right into my arms, and kiss those perfect plump lips all over again, feel the hot rasp of his breath against my mouth. I wanted to slide my hands right down his jeans and finish what I started earlier in the day …

But like I said. I couldn't even trust myself. And uh, the obvious deal-killer – I'd just been lying in a hospital bed. How attractive, right?

"Um. Jake." Ethan spoke at last.

"Yeah, buddy?"

"I couldn't stop thinking about what happened today after I went home. That's why I came back here for *real.*"

"No shit."

"Yeah, no shit. And … like …" he stepped toward me. Closer and closer. Each step he took took a little more of my breath away, 'til I had nothing left. "In a naughty way, Jake. But in another way, too."

"Oh Jesus," I panted. *A naughty way.* That made my cock tingle. *Another way?* That made my heart throb. The kid's got his bases covered – he knows how to make a man happy.

But, the cynic inside me, the doubting part of me resurfaced and said, *no way* – no way he means that like I think he means that. And even if he did?

"But we still work together, Ethan." I said to him, mere inches separating us. I couldn't help but keep glancing down at his lips. God I wanted to taste them so bad. I knew I must've looked pathetic.

Couldn't even control myself. “And, you're so much younger than I am. I'm … old … and unhealthy.”

“You're seven years older than me.” Ethan chuckled. He took one last step closer. “That's hardly an age difference.”

I couldn't help myself now. I saw my hands go up. I wasn't sure who was moving them, 'cause *I* certainly didn't feel like I was in control … but there they were anyway. Moving through the air, floating through the six inches that separated us.

And I stared in disbelief as my hands landed on Ethan's waist. I grabbed his waist between my big mitts. My thumbs met at his navel, my fingers close to his spine. I squeezed him gently. His tummy was so firm. Skin so supple and smooth.

Man he was perfect. A perfect little thing. I wanted him closer to me. So I pulled.

Ethan crashed into my torso. He laid his palms on my pecs, pushing back against me – a good thing, because if he didn't, I'd probably try to pull him into my very being. He fit perfectly in my arms, against my chest.

He kept his gaze low.

“Kiss me,” I demanded and lifted his chin.

He looked up at me. His big eyes seemed to twinkle. I saw a look in those eyes I hadn't seen anywhere else. Not in Kristi, not in Trevor, not even in his eyes earlier today at the lake.

This was something else. Like he'd seen a side of me no one else had seen. And he didn't just understand it, he accepted it. And maybe even – no, it was too early for that word.

I couldn't wait any longer. I leaned in, my hands cupping his face. His lips changed when our mouths met, like parched soil absorbing its first drink of water after a long drought. A juicy heat rushed into his lips, plumping them right up.

Among the chorus of wet kisses popping and sucking, we moaned with the release of too much pent-up stress. And I knew this was our *real* first kiss. Not like the one at the lake. This was something more.

I kissed him more and more urgently, wanting more, *demanding* more from his needy and tender lips. His hands slipped up my t-shirt, trailing his warm finger-tips all over my chest, squeezing and prodding at my hunks of muscle.

“Ethan,” I snarled, “are you sure?” I wanted to make certain. No more mistakes.

But he didn't answer. Not with words, anyway. Instead he just looked up, stared into my eyes, and then I felt a tug at my belt. My hips thrust forward as he yanked my belt free, whipped it out from my belt loops, and flung it aside.

"Dude," I sighed. "Ethan."

"You've had a long, hard day, Jake." He grinned as he popped the button of my jeans free and worked my zipper. He pushed me backward, walking me down the hall to my bedroom. "You better relax and take it easy. Doctor's orders."

I gasped softly. "*Shit.*"

He pushed me the whole way, steering me to the bedroom, until he pushed me against the mattress. Once he had me lying down he pulled my jeans off and helped me outta my shirt.

"You're so freakin' jacked, Jake." He laid next to me and traipsed his index finger up and down my abs, playing them like the washboard. "I never could get it out of my mind. Did you know that?"

"Know – know what?" I panted.

He chuckled. Kid's eyes were laser-focused on my torso. "Oh. You know. How I always looked at your muscles. And wondered what you looked like without a shirt on."

I gulped. "No … I mean …"

"I thought it was just because you were my mentor, you know? Because you were bigger and stronger and older and wiser and all these things … and that's all true. But I also couldn't stop *thinking* about you."

"Oh," I whispered.

Ethan grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head.

"Goddamn," I moaned, running my hands all over his slightly sun-kissed belly. "You're so perfect."

Ethan wiggled out of his jeans. We both laid side by side in my bed. Both of us hard as a rock, our cocks tenting the crotch of our underwear.

"Man." I moaned. "I've tried so hard not to think about this exact moment."

"Why?" he chuckled.

"'Cause I didn't think it'd ever happen. I didn't wanna drive myself nuts."

"But you said you *tried* not to think about it. Does that mean you did?"

Ethan's hand went tentatively to his crotch. His palm hovered over his stiffness.

I gulped. "Yeah, I did."

"*Oh,*" Ethan whimpered and he lowered his palm. Slowly he stroked up and down on the hard log under his boxers. "Tell me more."

"Damn," I moaned under my breath. "I saw you get hard that one day. In the van. When that daughter was trying to hit on me. I saw your hardness right through your jeans …"

Licking my lips, I couldn't resist anymore. I reached out to touch Ethan's member.

But he slapped my hand away. “Not yet. I just want talk.”

“Oh. Okay.” I heard myself swallow loudly. I have to admit, I was a little disappointed.

I hoped he wasn't one of those guys – not that I had much experience. Before Ethan, Trevor was the only guy I'd been with. But I'd heard the stories. Of guys that were 'straight' and wanted to get as close to hooking up with another guy as they possibly could … but always fall *just* short of actually doing it. Because, you know, they were *totally* straight.

That'd be a serious let down. I mean. I'd respect it if that was the case. But, it'd be hard not to be disappointed.

“So you *think* you saw me hard, huh?” Ethan asked, a devious glint in his eye.

“Oh no. I don't just think I did. I know I did. I saw every inch of your hardness, buddy.”

He gasped and his hips trembled. He took a second to catch his breath, then he broke out into a sneaky grin.

“You're right, I was hard as hell, Jake. Do you know why?”

“Nuh uh,” I shook my head, my cock pounding so hard in my boxers it hurt.

“I was thinking about you railing that daughter. All I could think about was your big goddamn cock … and that girl not even knowing what to do with it.” His eyes fluttered. “Err. Okay. So you saw that. Then what happened?”

“Oh. Right. I um. I couldn't stop thinking about it all day, man.”

“Uh huh.”

My eyes grew wide as I watched Ethan threaded his cock through the hole in his boxers. “Oh my God,” I whimpered, my throat tight as a knot.

“Go on,” Ethan grinned. “Tell me just what it was you were thinking about.”

“And um. Um. That – right there … is what I couldn't stop thinking about … I hoped like hell. That one day you'd be just a little curious. And I could kiss you. And coax you to pull your pants down just a little. And then your boxers. Until that came out,” I gulped, pointing at the glans of his cock that was still just sneaking through the slit of his boxers. “And um. Man. If you'd just let me suck it.”

“Did you jerk it?” he asked. “Thinking about sucking me off?”

“Hell yeah,” I admitted.

Hearing my confession, his cock heaved and a couple more inches of his bigness pushed through the slit.

“Damn,” I groaned. “You're big, buddy.”

“Let's see yours.”

I didn't need any persuading. I pulled my boxers right down and kicked 'em off my ankles.

“Damn.” Ethan's eyes bulged at my member. “That's a big cock, Jake.”

He pulled his boxers down. Now we were both naked, lying side by side, our hard cocks flat against our bellies. But neither of us touched each other. And we only cautiously touched ourselves, lightly palming over our members.

“I gotta tell you, Jake, when I was finally alone that night? I jerked it *so* hard. That girl made me so *jealous* and I didn't even know why.”

My mouth watered. *Man* I wanted him. I reached out for his big cock again, but he slapped my hand away once more.

“I thought maybe I was jealous that she liked you, and not me. But then why was I picturing *you* fucking her, and not me? That night of the storm, Jake … with lightning bolts exploding all around … thunder shaking the house. I have to admit something.”

He grabbed his cock and pulled it off his belly. Slowly, with his hand wrapped around his thick base, he stroked it upright. I sighed heavily when he reached the top, and a pearl of pre-cum appeared.

“That night I tried my own pre-cum, Jake.”

“How –” I gulped. “How'd you taste?”

“You tell me.”

He scooped his pre-cum up with his index-finger. Like a perfect dew drop, it stayed on his finger-tip. He brought it to my face. I opened my mouth and wrapped my lips tight around his finger. He pushed his finger in deeper. I sucked it hard, wrapped my tongue all around it, showed him what I could do if he'd only *let me* already.

Ethan pulled his finger out slowly, with my tongue swirling all around it. His pupils darkened and he watched in awe.

“Well?” he asked. “How do I taste?”

“So fuckin' sweet and good.”

“Yeah,” he grinned. “That's what I thought, too. It made me want more.”

“God *damn,*” I gasped. “You're a naughty fuckin' slut, Ethan.”

He bit his lip. “Yeah? You think so?”

“Sure do.” I tightened my fist around my cock. “And you're driving me *crazy* here, man. I can't wait any longer.”

I stroked myself, grunting and gasping as waves of pleasure washed over me.

“No, no, no no no no.” Ethan shook his head.

“What!” I whimpered. “C'mon, dude!”

"I said *no.* You're not allowed to jerk it."

"Well why the hell not."

"'Cause the doctor said you gotta take it *easy.* Here. Lemme take care of you."

"Oh, *Ethan,*" I sighed quietly as he slithered around on the bed. He turned around, crawling down my belly, trailing light little kisses all the way down my abs and past my coarse bush of pubes.

My cock lifted and jumped with excitement, impatiently waiting for his hot, wet mouth to come closer and closer …

Ethan stopped just shy of it. "Um," he said hesitantly.

"Yeah?"

"I've never done this before. Obviously, I guess."

"Don't worry. Just do what you like done to you. And maybe it'll help to imagine it like … all you're doing is making out with it?"

"Making out with a *cock*?" Ethan chuckled.

I shrugged. "Yeah. Exactly. That's how I think of it."

"Huh." He let out a deep breath. "That's kinda sexy when you put it like that."

"Right?"

"Okay, so …" Ethan leaned forward. His plump, juicy lips kissed the sensitive skin all around my member, working his way closer and closer. Until, at last, he planted a tiny kiss on my base. Then he worked his way higher.

By the time he got to my tip, I was gasping, my cock pulsing upward, just *begging* him to take me in.

He paused one last time. His mouth open, my cock jumping for him. I was almost embarrassed by how my manhood was behaving. And then?

"*Oh!*" I groaned as he put his warm lips over my head and made a seal. "Fuck!"

"Mmf! Mmm … Mmm mm!" Ethan made the cutest little muffled moans and whimpers as he pushed his mouth down my member. Those sounds *alone* could get me off.

The tight softness of his warm cheeks squeezing my length. The swirl and swivel of his luscious tongue, sliding up and all around my sensitive cock. The sight of his lean, young man's body – on all fours, hovering over me with my cock in his mouth. The curious way he pleasured a man for the first time, delighting in all the new tastes and sensations …

The sights, the sounds, the decadent pleasures – I lost myself in 'em all.

"Oh Ethan," I panted. "You're so good. Oh Ethan."

"Mmmf," he whimpered, sucking his cheeks in tight on me. He found my balls and squeezed 'em with his hand. His other hand?

Between his legs. Sliding up and down his member.

"Ugh," I groaned. I couldn't take it anymore.

I grabbed Ethan's hips, lifted him off the mattress and dropped him right over my body into 69.

"Jake!" he protested. "But the doc–"

"*Fuck* the doctor's orders!" I roared. "I need to taste you so damn bad."

"Ohh," he submitted with a moan as I angled his manhood into my mouth.

I had it all. Ethan's mouth on my cock. His big, delicious cock filling mine. My hands gripped tight on his round ass. I stretched his juicy cheeks apart until his peach-colored, pristine pucker tightly shut. That made me grin.

With mouths on cocks and hips thrusting deeper, our hot, sweaty bodies clamped together even tighter. A cacophony of grunts and groans, of sloppy lips sucking and slurping, of muffled pants and moans, sealed our bond.

"Oh yeah!" Ethan whimpered with my cock in his mouth.

"Yeah, yeah!" I groaned my words right on his throbbing member, growing fatter and longer in my throat.

I knew he was close. I could feel his swollen and surging excitement. I could taste his wild yearning to *let go* and indulge in climax.

I was close, too. In fact I was fighting it back. 'Cause I wanted to cum with him.

I had a feeling I might know what would push him over the edge. I wet my finger and set the tip against his virgin ring. His ass squeezed shut even tighter. Gently, I poked at it, and his resistance weakened and melted away.

"Unnh!" he wailed with pleasured shock and confusion, his ass relaxing for my finger.

You didn't think it'd feel that good, did you?

His cock heaved and throbbed, letting my finger slide deeper every time. Soon he had me knuckle-deep. He rocked back and forth wildly, fucking himself on my finger and sliding his manhood in and out of my mouth.

"Oh my God, oh my God!" he panted, his voice muffled on my cock. "I'm gonna cum Jake!"

Pleasured panic rumbled deep in his pelvis. I could tell he wasn't sure if he should get off of me. I wrapped my free hand around his back and pushed, pulling him deeper into my mouth, so he knew just where I wanted him.

"Uaaah!" he moaned loudly, my cock sliding in and out of his mouth.

The thought of his orgasm, his delighted shouts and whimpers, his cream in my mouth, was all I needed.

"Yeahhhh!" we groaned in unison, two cocks in the sanctity of hot, wet, tight lips. Cream flowed, seed busted out, shooting against the backs of throats and rolling right down.

"Uhghgh!" "Ohh!" "Yeahh!" We sucked each other for every last drop.

Too tired to move, Ethan stayed on top of me with my finger still in his ass, his cock softening in my mouth. His warm body felt so nice on top of mine, his lungs rising and falling as we panted for air.

At last he crawled off me and snuggled up next to me.

"Oops," he said. "That wasn't supposed to happen … I was supposed to take care of you."

"Hell," I grinned. "I don't mind one bit."

We kissed. I could taste my salty seed on his lips, and I'm sure he could taste his cream on mine. That only made our kisses hotter, wetter, juicier.

"Damn, Jake," Ethan said, pulling himself away from me. "That was fuckin' hot."

I squeezed him tight into my side. "Hell yeah. I love your taste."

"*Fuck,*" he whimpered, shaking his head. "It's like you know all the right things to say to a guy."

I chuckled. "Yeah, well, why do you think that is?"

I loved the cool little puffs of air from his nostrils as he breathed; they were a sweet kiss of relief on my hot, glistening shoulder. I squeezed him in even tighter.

"It's late and I'm tired, bud. You wanna …?"

"Wanna what?" he asked, his eyes bright.

"You know … sleep over?" I asked softly.

"You know it."

Ethan wiggled into the mattress and pulled the sheets over us both. I spooned him and held him close, our body heat growing under the sheets. With a tired yawn, I drifted off to sleep.

21

– Ethan –

I'm not sure who stirred first, but we both woke up early the next morning.

"Mornin'." Jake rubbed his eyes.

"Mm. Morning," I groaned sleepily and rolled on top of him and gave him a kiss.

Jake chuckled. "I was afraid you'd wake up horrified."

"Why? Because I'm in bed with, *gasp,* another man?"

Jake paused. "Uh. Well, yeah. Exactly."

"Oh, please. I'd have a terrible memory if I couldn't remember why I'm here."

"So why *are* you here?" he grinned.

"'Cause, man. It feels right. So shutup already." I huffed, feeling a hot masculine rage rush over me. I pinched Jake's nipples hard and he yelped. "Stop trying to make me talk about my feelings."

He chuckled and wrestled back against me. We tussled in bed, and I tried to roll on top of him and maybe put him in a head-lock … but that was a bad move. Because Jake is big and strong and he easily broke out of it and overpowered me. Next thing I knew, his big hands were wrapped around my wrists and he was on top of me, with my arms pinned above my head.

"Okay, okay!" I laughed. "You win."

Jake smiled, a fire smoldering in his eyes. With his weight on top of my pelvis, I started to grow under him. Jake rocked himself up and down it, my stirring manhood buried between his muscled buns.

"Fuck, Jake," I sighed.

"Just lay there," he winked.

"*Oh,*" I moaned as his lips wrapped around me, and my member went plunging between his warm and wet cheeks.

… Well, it's safe to say that it took us a little while to get out of bed that morning. Er, afternoon.

By the time I managed to peel myself off him, I was already late for my plans to meet up with my friends. I reluctantly got out of bed, wanting to spend the rest of the day with Jake … doing what? Anything, I didn't care. We could stay in bed all day and I wouldn't complain one bit. Or we could have a repeat of yesterday and spend the whole day fishing.

Minus all the awkward parts where I tried to run away, of course.

Jake was quiet. I thought it had to be because he was tired and worn out from our morning session.

"I don't wanna leave you," I mewled as I wiggled into my jeans.

"But you've got plans," Jake said matter-of-factly. "You don't wanna cancel 'em for me. 'Specially when you're gonna see me tomorrow at work."

"I'm not gonna flake out on my friends. I'm only saying …" I leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. "I'd *love* to."

“Well it's good that you don't. 'Cause if you keep blowing your friends off, one day, you'll wake up and realize they've stopped calling. And then I'll be all you have. And then you'll *have* to spend all your time with me and you'll hate it.”

“I dunno. Maybe not the worst thing in the world.” I bit my lip.

“You say that now …” he warned. “But trust me. You'd get sick of my ass. Real fast.”

“Yeah. We'll see.”

Jake looked down and I saw the hint of a frown, a worry, crease his face.

“What's the matter, Jake?” I asked, climbing onto the bed to give him one last hug.

“Oh, nothin',” he lied.

I rolled my eyes. “Liar. That's your lying voice. I recognize that tone.”

Jake chuckled, his hand cradling the small of my back. “Really. It's nothin'. Now go on, you gotta get goin'.”

“Hmph. Fine. But next time, you tell me what's bothering you.”

We said our goodbyes. I hurried out the door and raced back into town.

***

I walked into the bowling alley and grinned. The smell of that place, *whatever* it was, never got old. Neither did the sound of heavy balls warbling down the hardwood floor, or the raucous, wooden *crash* of pins as they popped and exploded into one another.

I found my friends at our usual lane – the one at the back of the alley. Sunday afternoon bowling was a bit of a *guy's tradition* among my friends. Some people came and went, but this core group of four – Larry, Simon, Charles and me – always stayed the same. A couple pitchers of beer, plus a couple more empty ones, littered the table. Pitchers are only $2 on Sunday afternoon … now you might see why it's a tradition for us.

“Dude, you're *so* late! Where the hell were ya?” Larry grinned when I approached. Charles turned and greeted me, and Simon too, after he threw a strike and turned around, fists-pumping, and saw my face.

Don't be awkward, don't be awkward, I thought to myself. Last thing I needed was anybody to be suspicious of my latest whereabouts.

“Hey everybody.” I cleared my throat. “Sorry I'm late. Just got caught up hangin' out with … somebody.”

"Somebody," Larry grinned, "like *who?*"

"Oh … just a friend."

"Uh huh," Simon laughed.

"You old dog," Charles laughed and jabbed my side. "We *heard* that you officially called it quits with Johanna. Already got something else lined up, don't you?"

"Ha," I rubbed the back of my neck. "C'mon guys, it's really not like that."

"Yeah, right!" "You were hittin' it *all* night long, weren't ya!" "So who *is* she?"

I groaned. They all seemed to agree – I was a bad liar. Technically, I guess I have to admit that they were right, too.

I entered my name into the computer scorekeeper and grabbed a 13 pound ball. I pulled it back, launched it down the lane, and watched as my ball hurtled down the lane … only to veer off into the gutter about 10 feet shy of the first pin.

"Good one Ethan!" they laughed. "So tell us more about this lady of yours!"

I guess it should be said: despite our weekly bowling tradition, we're not very good.

"So what have you guys been up to this weekend?" I asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Oh, the *yooze*," Larry said. "But more importantly, back to you and your new lady."

I groaned while I waited for my ball to return. "There isn't a new lady! I'm tellin' you, there really isn't."

On the inside, I had to chuckle. *Technically,* this was true!

My ball shot up the return and I grabbed it. I took a deep breath to ready myself for my second shot. I tried to clear my mind – which worked, for a second, before an image of Jake flashed through my mind. I saw his muscled torso, myself lying on top of it … my hands resting atop his sizzling thighs, which made my hands look so pathetically small … and of course … his big member as I licked and sucked it, or *made out with it* like Jake recommended.

Oh god not now, I reprimanded myself. Last thing I needed was a fucking *stiffy* at the bowling alley. Then my friends would *really* know something was up.

I exhaled, pushed everything out of my head, and stepped forward and went into my bowling stance. The ball left my hands and felt perfect. I felt so confident, I strutted back to my friends, not even bothering to watch … until I turned around at just the right moment to see my ball hurtle perfectly into the pocket. The pins crashed and I picked up the spare.

"Woooooo! Someone's feelin' good!" Larry laughed, and my

friends all slapped at each other. “Dude gets a little pussy and look at 'em now … actin' all cool and confident, doesn't even watch his ball!”

“C'mon guys, I'm telling you–”

But Simon interrupted me when he grabbed the collar of my shirt and pulled it down.

“*Boom,*” Simon said. He pointed at my neck. The others looked too, and their faces lit up with shock.

I gasped. “What is it?”

“Holy crap! Only the biggest hickey *ever,*” Charles said.

“I was just jokin', Ethan, but *whoa.* She sucked your neck *real* good. Probably sucked you some other places too, huh?”

“Oh god,” I muttered under my breath. My head ratcheted up with a tight pressure, and a wave of heat rushed into my face, and I'm sure I *looked* bright red like a cherry tomato, because I sure as hell felt like one …

The boys took one look at my face, and even though they thought it was funny at first, they told me to relax.

“Chill dude, chill! We're just giving you a hard time,” Larry said. “You don't have to tell us who you banged. And we're not gonna say shit to Johanna, either.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

“Word is *she's* interested in somebody else already too,” Charles piped up.

“Shutup,” Larry whispered and quickly back-handed Charles in the chest.

“Ha,” I said demurely. “That's really okay if she is. I honestly don't mind.”

“You're really okay with that?” Larry asked, a bit cock-eyed.

“Sure.” I shrugged. “We had problems for years, guys. Let's be honest. It's been over for a while. We stuck together more out of habit than anything else.”

“Oh …” Larry nodded as he processed this information. “Huh.”

“So … do you think it's gonna be weird living with your ex?” Charles asked me as he got up for his turn to bowl.

“I do, actually.” I let out a deep sigh. “Listen. Guys. I've really been kind of dreading the move to Chicago, honestly. My life is here, man. I wanna pursue carpentry. I'm good at it and I like it.”

Larry spoke first. “Um. Well we'd miss ya, obviously, but … that's fine, man. It's not gonna be weird for you though, is it? Us living with Johanna?”

I shook my head. “Not at all.”

They all looked at each other and exchanged looks of relief. Then they looked back at me.

“It was kinda obvious that your heart wasn't ever in it,” Larry

croaked out.

"It was?" My voice went high.

"Yeah dude. You've got your life here and that's awesome. We're just *starting* ours. Trying to figure out what to do next. We're gonna go be broke kids, fresh out of college, trying to find ourselves in a new city. Kinda romantic if you think about it … or bummy. One or the other. Anyway, you're already on your own path, and you're probably making more than *I'm* ever gonna make with my freakin' English degree."

"Yeah," Simon agreed. "I wish I woulda done some kind of trade. God knows why I majored in *film studies.* My parents just told me to get *any* degree – so I sure as hell did! But uh … I'm starting to wonder if I should've done something a little more concrete."

"How much of this is because of your new girl, Mailhot? Be honest!" Charles ribbed me.

"Okay – honestly?" I grinned. "Maybe a little."

And maybe someday I can tell them the truth.

We bowled for the next couple hours, 'til our arms were good and sore and our backs and chests were damp with sweat, and then we went our separate ways. I knew I had one more person I had to break the news to. So after we all went our separate ways, I called up Johanna and asked to meet her somewhere.

***

I met Johanna at her place.

"Really? You're serious? You're really not gonna come?" she asked with a frown after I broke the news. "I thought we'd be able to get along fine even if we were split up …"

"Heck, we probably *would* get along fine, Jo. We've *always* gotten along just fine … we never had fights, or big disagreements, even when we had our break-ups."

"Yeah," she nodded. "It was so easy with you like that. I guess that's why it was so hard to leave you …"

I was sure she'd left her thought unfinished; that there was more she could say but she was holding back so she didn't hurt me.

" … hard to leave me, even though you didn't feel the fireworks, or the butterflies in your belly?" I asked.

Johanna nodded slowly, with a '*yup, nailed it*' look on her face.

"Yeah," I chuckled. "I know."

"What's that about, anyway?" she asked. "Other guys I've dated? It's like clockwork! The minute we break up, they turn into psychos. They go from loving you to hating you like you're the most foul creature to ever exist." She let out a frustrated groan. "But *you.*

You were always so calm … and so easy to get along with …"

"I dunno. I guess I'm just … not like other guys." I sighed guiltily. I couldn't tell her yet, either. Maybe someday, but not now.

"You can say *that* again." She paused. "Sorry I made you feel bad about wanting to do carpentry. You must've thought I was a monster."

"Not at all, Jo, and it's okay. I understand it. You want to be with someone on *your* life path. I get that, Jo, and I don't blame you at all."

She nodded. "Okay, but … what about the lease? We can't just break it …"

"The others said they don't mind, and they know a couple guys who said they'd like to come if anyone dropped out. I'll take care of the sublease issue."

"Hm," she shrugged. "I really thought they'd be against it. I guess I was afraid they wouldn't want me to be there if you weren't there. I just wanna go somewhere new. *Do* something new. I've been here for so long and it feels like things have been so *stagnant* and I just want to make a big change in my life. Am I making sense? Or do I sound like a nut?"

"You make total sense. I 100% know what you mean, because I needed that myself." I took a deep breath. "And … as for the others? They absolutely want you to go, Jo."

"Really? How do you know?"

"Because they said so! Plus, they don't want me to go if I don't wanna be there. So if anything they want *you* more than they want me to go."

"Oh, c'mon, that's not true."

"Sure it is. They know I wanna stay and keep doing carpentry. And even *if* I got a carpentry gig out there … I don't wanna start all over in Chicago. I've got a good thing going with Jake. Yeah, I'll miss you guys, but I gotta follow my own heart. You know?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "I'm sorry it didn't work out between us."

"It's alright. We both *really* tried. It just wasn't meant to be."

We talked a little while longer, mostly rehashing the same feelings. I knew just how she felt. That we were a good match – because we got along well, and we didn't have any major disagreements. But it never really felt like the connection, the *love,* was actually there.

After just one day with Jake, well, I obviously knew *why* that was. But I also, for the first time in my life, knew exactly why it was that I wouldn't *ever* feel that way towards women.

I promised Jo that I'd visit her and my other friends someday, and I truly meant it. I'd love to visit Chicago … I just don't wanna live

there! Not when my life is here in Buffalo!

We said our goodbyes, though we promised to make sure we'd see each other again before her big move.

22

– Jake –

After Ethan left, I got outta bed and made myself some coffee. I took my mug with me to the lake and stood watch over it, thinking things over on a nice Sunday afternoon.

That was dumb, Jake, really dumb.

I shook my head at myself in disgust. A man might say differently, but at the end of the day, he always thinks with his crotch. No matter how much he tells himself he's above it … no matter how much he swears up and down he won't fuck on the first date. When it comes down to it, all it takes is a little temptation. And once that dick starts swelling up, he can't think clearly.

I thought I learned that lesson yesterday the first time it happened. When Ethan kissed me and I got carried away. And then I had a second chance to redeem myself, to show some restraint … and what did I do … I got carried away *again.*

I'm not saying I didn't have fun, or didn't like hooking up. Did I enjoy myself? Oh, hell yeah. But after he left, things got all twisted and turned upside down. An awful aching hole enveloped my heart – the same way you feel any time you make a big mistake that tricks your heart into believing things might be a certain way.

I *like* Ethan. A lot. I can admit that to myself, finally. He's cute and funny and sexy and I like spending time with him more than anything. But he's young … and impressionable … and he works for me. And he's just using me to get out of a hair-brained plan to move to Chicago with his on-again, off-again girlfriend.

Even I know that.

And here's the thing about younger guys. They look up to you like you're some paragon of wisdom. They think you know what you're doing, that you've got your life together. They don't realize you're just like them … ambling through life with no idea what you're actually doin'. You're a little further along in your journey, but at the end of the day, you're just as clueless as anyone else.

Sigh.

Oh. Here's the other thing about younger guys – and this one

makes me feel *real* guilty. Their hearts are still so tender and trusting. So full of eager love, ready to give it and take it at a moment's notice. Just because Ethan hooked up with me?, well, I don't think it means a thing, honestly.

Is he gay? Maybe. But maybe he's just curious. Maybe he's just an open-minded guy. It'd be careless of me to get swept off my feet.

But one thing's for certain. I fucked with his heart. And now shit's gonna be real difficult, tense and confusing between us at work. But the only thing I can do is focus on my job and try not to give in and make things even worse …

***

Monday morning, I picked Ethan up at the same time as usual.

"Mornin'," I said, giving him a short glance as he popped into my van.

"Hey Jake!" he said, all bright-eyed and happy, and I could've sworn he was looking to see if I wanted to kiss him first thing. That wrenched at my heart, too. "How'd the rest of your weekend go?"

"Oh … it was good," I said, my voice flat.

"Yeah?" he paused. I didn't say anything. Maybe I wanted the mood to be quiet. I dunno. "Yeah, mine was pretty good, too."

Another pause. I knew he wanted me to ask about his weekend.

"So uh, what are we doing today, boss?" Ethan asked.

"Oh … a customer wants us to tear out their old cabinets and install their new ones. Plus trim work. Et cetera." Gosh, my voice was so monotonous and lifeless.

"Great," Ethan said, adopting a little bit of my tone.

I could tell my quiet mood had finally infected him. He turned and looked out his window. After a while he cleared his throat and spoke again.

"Hey, I brought you a lunch, just like I said I would."

"Ha. You didn't have to do that."

"But I *want* to. I already told you. You gotta eat healthier."

Argh. Now he was really killing me …

"Thanks," I grumbled. "And, thanks again for – for helping me this weekend. I mean with the roof, and the hospital visit." I tugged at my collar. Man, I felt hot and uncomfortable.

"No problem." Ethan sounded different. He sounded funny. Like he knew something wasn't quite right.

I'm sorry, kid, I thought to myself. *I never shoulda got you mixed up in my stuff.*

I pulled into the customer's driveway. "Well, here we are."

"Okay," Ethan said in a sing-song voice. We jumped outta the van and started bringing our tools inside.

23

– Ethan –

I woke up Monday morning happy as a bird. My roommate told me Sunday night that he was taking a sudden road trip out of town and I had the place to myself all week. I had to bite the inside of my cheeks to keep from grinning like an idiot – the thought of having Jake over after work practically made me pant like a dog.

Until I climbed into his van in the morning and saw his face.

I didn't get it. After what happened between me and Jake over the weekend, I thought for *sure* that we had an instant connection. Some kind of chemistry. I was so excited to see his van pull up, so excited to pull that door open and jump in.

What was I expecting? I dunno. Maybe some raunchy part of me thought I'd jump in and he'd be like, "*hey sexy, I couldn't stop thinking about you all weekend.*"

And I'd be like, "*yeah, me too! I still can't believe what went down between us … I've never done anything with another guy … but it felt so right! I just want some more!*"

And he'd look at me and grin, and say, "*God, I'm so hard right now*," and point down at his crotch, and I'd look and gasp!, say, "*you really are hard, Jake!*"

And then I'd do the only natural thing – my head bobbing in his lap, kissing and licking his sweltering manhood, his sweet grunts and groans filling the van as we shoot down the highway, off to some job.

Um. Yeah. That was my fantasy, I guess. The thing that kept me up all night, jerkin' myself over and over until I couldn't believe the numbers on the alarm clock and worried about bags under my eyes.

And what was the reality?

I climbed into that van, and Jake could barely turn his head, barely muster the courage to look at my face. I kept staring at him, waiting for him to turn and look me *in the eye*.

Did he regret what had happened between us? Did *I* do something wrong? Did I read everything incorrectly?

I didn't get it. If anything, *I* should be the guy freaking out right now. Me, the guy who has been 'straight' for his entire life, only to very-fucking-recently find out he enjoys the company of other men in a bigger way than he ever knew …

And yet I'm not. If anything I'm *more* comfortable with what happened between me and Jake than he is. How else do you explain it? How else do you figure his inability to *talk* to me now?

A terrible wave of worry crashed over me. Was I imagining it, or was Jake acting like the stereotypical, disinterested guy after a random, meaningless hook up? I sure hoped not. Because it wasn't *meaningless* to me.

I felt flustered and confused, the way I imagined a lot of girls must feel when they realize the guy they just boned only wanted 'some ass' and not a *thing* more.

Was that all I was? A piece of ass?

Ugh. The thought made my stomach turn. I was so happy, so excited yesterday. Thinking my life would be on this exciting new path. *Ugh.* I can be such an idiot sometimes.

So I turned and looked out the window. Watched the trees, the cars go flying by. I hoped Jake might say something to ease my mind, but that seemed less likely with each passing second.

At last we arrived at the client's house. “Welp, we're here.”

“Okay.”

***

We didn't talk much during the job. Just little grunts and groans here and there. One word questions, one word replies. No banter, no playful jokes like we normally do.

The hours slowly dragged by. By the time lunch came 'round, I felt like we'd already worked a full day. We went back outside to the van and grabbed our lunches.

“Here's yours,” I said dully, passing him a salad that was identical to the one I'd made myself. Grilled chicken, bean sprouts, avocado, red onion, olives … and a vegetable smoothie, too.

“Oh, thanks,” he mumbled. “You really don't have to do this for me though, Ethan. It's a lot of work.”

I forced a gust of air through my nostrils. “I don't mind.”

“It's really, really good though,” he said quietly.

“Thanks.”

We ate mostly in silence. After our food was gone, we sat in even more silence. Normally, this was when we bantered and talked and the rest of our break flew by. Today? Not so much.

I picked up a branch I saw lying in the grass and got out my

whittling knife. My hands went to work, with my mind elsewhere.

I just couldn't believe it. I wanted to ask Jake what went wrong. I just had to work up the courage to do it. Hopefully he'd be able to talk about it – and not just sit there and lie to me like I knew so many guys did. I'd heard the stories of how a guy acts after he uses someone. How he sits there and swears up and down nothing's wrong. But he keeps acting like a big, quiet weirdo. Until you get frustrated and move on.

Stupid me. I thought I didn't have to worry about anything like that happening … why? Because I thought I was straight? Why would Jake care? At the end of the day he was a man, just like all the others. A guy who could be overcome by his own desires and do things he ends up regretting the next day.

"Uh," Jake chuckled after a long, quiet while. "Are you really doing that right now?"

"Wha?" I muttered, snapped out of my thoughts.

He bumped my shoulder and pointed at the branch in my hand that I'd been whittling.

"Oh. *Oh,*" I stammered, my eyes wide.

I'd stripped the branch of its bark and, err, accidentally given it an interesting … *ahem* … shape. Complete with a nicely-sculpted ridge and everything. It looked quite a bit like Jake's, actually.

In other words, *once again* I had completely embarrassed myself.

"Jeez," I stammered. "I didn't mean to – that's – wow. I'm embarrassed."

"I was wondering if you were doin' it on the purpose. I was afraid *I* was the one with the dirty mind at first." He chuckled. "But you just kept going. Once you got the head carved out I knew I wasn't nuts."

"Yeah," I stammered, my cheeks burning. I stuffed the branch into my bag. "When I whittle I don't really pay attention to what I'm doing. Guess it shows you what I got on the mind, huh …"

"Heh," Jake chuckled. I hoped he'd take the bait so we could talk. But instead he looked at his watch. "Well. Lunch is over. You ready?"

I sighed. "Sure."

***

We finished up the job and left the client's house at 5 PM.

I sighed, watching out my window, while Jake drove back to my place. I knew if I didn't say anything now, I'd only regret it later. And it'd make it *that* much harder to go to work tomorrow if I had

another awkward day of work to look forward to.

And as we got closer and closer to my house, my sense of urgency only boiled hotter. I knew I had to tell him before it was too late.

"Look, Jake," I blurted out finally, just as he pulled into my driveway. "We have to talk."

"Oh," he swallowed. "Um, okay. What about?"

"Well, why it's so weird between us right now, for one."

"Oh," he said quietly.

"Look, Jake, I *liked* what happened between us. A lot. I'm not gonna lie."

"I know," he said in a shamed, almost-whisper that crushed my heart.

Fuck, I thought. *He doesn't like me after all. He regrets it. He was only toying with me!*

"… Is that the problem here? You don't like me the way I like you?"

Jake groaned. "Man. It's – it's a lot of things. But for one, it's pointless to get involved, when there's a chance you might move with your friends …"

"Nope," I laughed. "No chance."

"Wha'?" he turned and looked at me.

"Yup. I told everyone yesterday that I officially am not going."

"But your friends … you're all excited to live together."

I shrugged. "Not really. I wanted to stay here, honestly, and keep learning carpentry from *you.* I don't wanna work for anybody else."

"Oh. Damn. So … you're really gonna stick around? You're still gonna be my apprentice?"

"Yup," I said, a wave of relief crashing over me. "Is that all that was bothering you?"

"Um … wow … I dunno. That's a big part of it, yeah."

"So – you – you're not repulsed by me or anything?"

"Of course not," he chuckled.

"You had *fun* then? This weekend?"

"Yeah, of course," he said softly.

"Good," I grinned. "Because I did too. And um, I have to tell you something."

"What's that?"

"My roommate's out of town."

"Oh." Jake's eyes suddenly darkened, his stare going right through me. He looked so uncomfortable … so enslaved by his own lust. I have to admit, I enjoyed it!

"… Would you like to come in, Jake?"

"I dunno, Ethan, I – I probably shouldn't, …"

"I'll make it worth your while." I bit my lip. I reached over and touched his leg, sliding my hand over his inner thigh. "I really, really liked what you did with your finger the other night, Jake."

"Oh god," Jake panted. "But … how can we keep working together …"

"Same as we always do?" I chuckled. "Except we fuck on our time off?"

"Oh my god," Jake panted again.

I reached higher up his thigh. I cupped my hand over the bulge in his crotch that was thickening by the second. His head dropped back, a pleasured sigh escaped him, and his hips thrust uncontrollably upward against my hand.

I had him eating *right* out of my palm – and I had to keep myself from laughing over it. "So? What do you think – you wanna come inside, Jake?"

He looked at me and gulped. He nodded and reached for his seat belt. "Yeah. Hell yeah. Let's go."

I grinned like a fool. "Good. Glad you came to your senses."

24

– Jake –

No no no no Jake! The rational part of me screamed as I followed my apprentice into his apartment. *I gave you one simple mission! Don't lead the guy on!*

But that was before he gave me those hungry eyes. That sexy way he bit his lip. The little whimpers he made when he touched me, when he felt my manhood growing through my jeans …

And *oh my god* I felt like a monster. I felt like a monster when he touched me, because I became someone else, someone who just wanted to *fuck* and didn't care what the consequences could be.

I thought it'd be easy – that all I had to do was act a little disinterested, and he'd back off. I thought for sure that he'd end up going to Chicago anyway. That he'd just used me to get back at Johanna.

But no. He told me he's definitely staying. He wants to be my apprentice after all. So *what* if he's staying? That kinda makes things

worse, doesn't it? If he was moving away, at least then all this madness would have an expiration date! But if he's staying? If I have to work with the guy I'm secretly boning?

You can't keep fucking your apprentice, Jake! The rational part of me warned again. *You're playing with fire and you know it!*

And then we rushed into his house, tittering like horny teenagers when their parents are dumb enough to leave them home alone. I followed him in, walked through that front door and gasped when I saw his place.

A collection of empty beer bottles littered the table. A pizza box, empty if not for the stale bread crusts left behind. A fish tank with no actual living fish or plants inside of it – just an aquatic ghost town. A single poster of a model adorned the wall – I think her name is Kate Upton?, wearing a bikini and pouting at the camera, her breasts prominently pushed up for the straight man's pleasure.

This, Jake, is who you're getting involved with, the rational part of me said again. *He's young. Real young.*

"Oh," I mumbled, blinking as I took the sights in.

"Oh, sorry, my roommate … I love him but he's kind of a slob …" Ethan chuckled, a little embarrassed.

I had a sudden impulse to shake my head and say no, sorry, this is all a mistake. But Ethan grabbed my forearm and pulled me, leading me to his bedroom.

"Listen, Ethan," I stammered.

"What's up?" he flirted, his hand going right back between my legs.

"*Ungh,*" I whimpered, like he'd found my vulnerable spot. "God damn that feels good."

"It's about to feel better."

"Oh my god, Ethan."

He took me to his bedroom. I stepped in and looked around. He was right – it was his roommate who was the slob. Ethan's room was tidy, neat, with photographs and paintings on the wall. He had an actual *bookcase* filled with books, and thank god, no big-boobed models to stare at us and watch …

Even though we were home alone, Ethan shut the door behind me. He advanced on me until my back was against the door, and then he pressed himself into me, his smaller body feeling so fuckin' right against mine …

"I'm gonna give you everything, Jake," he promised, his eyes glinting, and I could see his desire burning in his irises like a damned wildfire.

I gulped. "But – shouldn't we shower first?"

"Truth be told?" A devious grin snaked across his lips. "I *like*

your salty man musk."

"Oh my god," I whimpered again. "You're so dirty, dude."

He licked his plump, pink lips, wetting them, and pressed his mouth against my own.

Holy shit.

His kisses were even hotter than the first time. Whatever doubt or resistance I had left, instantly melted away once those hot, sweet lips touched mine. I moaned into his mouth, and it was like he woke the beast again, and I grabbed him and clutched at him and pulled him hard against my body, our hard cocks rubbing against each other through our jeans …

"Oh, Jake!" he moaned. I grabbed onto his hair, pulled his head back roughly, kissed his neck – I saw the hickeys I'd left him over the weekend and I wanted to leave him *more.* More, and in other places, too.

I pushed Ethan back and overpowered him easily. I shoved him back on his bed and ripped his jeans off in a hurry. Then his boxers, too, and he was bare from the waist down, his big cock sticking right up in the air.

He tried to stroke himself, but I batted his hands away. "*Mine,*" I roared. I wrapped my lips around his meat and *oh,* oh man – what'd Ethan call it? Salty man musk? Yeah, his was perfect. He smelled like himself, tasted like himself, but more perfectly – the essence of himself. All solid and hard and fleshy and perfect in my mouth.

I slurped up and down his length, my hand sneaking under his shirt and tweaking his nipples. I loved to listened to the noises he made – they told me just how he liked it.

He pressed his feet against my crotch, rubbing his arches up and down my shaft, which just drove me totally crazy. My tight fist tugged him up and down fast and hard, crazily, like a jack-hammer busting up the pavement, just *bam-bam-bam-bam!,* all the while I kept his glans tight in the sweet suction of my cheeks.

It didn't take long before Ethan's brows went up, and his mouth made a little *o* shape, and he started panting, "oh my God, Jake! Oh my God!"

And I kept working him, faster and harder, until I felt it – a wet cloud of warmth filled my mouth. I swallowed it down right away, until it filled my mouth again, and I swallowed and swallowed until he had no more left to give.

"Oh … man …" Ethan panted. "You're *so* good at that. But now it's my turn."

He sat up and pulled my jeans down, then my boxers. He didn't even get them down my thigh before my cock came flopping out, and he greedily sucked it right up.

“Mmmf!” Ethan was the most vocal little cock-sucker I'd ever had. I loved his noises, his slurps and moans and grunts and groans … it was a wonderful little symphony of the sexiest, most toe-curling noises. I swear that could've got me off alone.

He swirled my cock in his mouth. He really took my advice to “make out with it” to heart, I guessed, since he was really, really obsessed with french-kissing the tip. Until he made it all red and hard and swollen and I had to push his forehead off me, 'cause he might make me cum too early.

“Damn it!” I grunted. “You're so good!”

“Don't cum yet,” he chuckled, turning over on all fours. “I told you what I want.”

“Oh man,” I whimpered, staring at the beautiful ass before me. “Ethan … oh Ethan …”

I rubbed my big hand over his cheeks. Spanked them lightly. Squeezed 'em. I thought how perfect he was, what a great guy he was, how I didn't deserve it. Any of it.

I knew I should just – should pull my pants up right now and say, hey, kid, listen. I don't deserve you. I'm a hot mess. I should've kept it professional between us in the first place. I don't know what the hell got into me but I've got a weakness, a really fucking bad weakness, and it's boys like you. But I'll *never* be the man you want me to be. I can't *love* you like you want me to love you. I've got too much going on, I'm too scarred, I've got too much baggage!

And look at him … look at how perfect he is. Look at this plump little ass I hold in my hands. So milky white and smooth and round. When you spank it, it jiggles, but just for a second – it's like a snare drum.

I gripped his ass cheeks and pulled them apart. His little virgin hole was so mouth-wateringly pure. All peach-colored, and tightly squeezed shut, with a little pinkness in the middle.

“C'mon, Jake, what are you waiting for?” he asked, wiggling his rear at me to tempt me. He tossed a bottle of lube. It landed between my thighs.

“Damn you,” I snarled as I picked up the lube. “I can't even think straight when you tease me like this …”

“Hee hee,” he chuckled. “Good.”

Good? What part of this is good? I thought, a little outraged. I squeezed the bottle of lube over his ass, watching as the clear liquid drizzled over his perfect hole. The second the liquid touched him he jumped forward and cooed. But then he pushed back, leaned into it, and I gaped in disbelief as his hole loosened, the lube spilling into it.

Oh yeah. This part of it. This is very, very … good.

I stuck the tip of my thumb against his bum. Lightly massaged

him, rubbed smooth circles around his pinkness. He gasped and groaned and encouraged me to go further, deeper – panting *yes! Yes! More!*

I'd never, ever had anyone like this before. He pushed his ass against me, sliding his tight little ring against my finger – the friction was so perfect, so lovely, so fucking tight, it filled my head. Made me *drunk* on the feeling of what my cock would feel like in his tight virgin ass.

"Ethan …" I grumbled with my last bit of clear-headedness, my last bit of responsibility.

"Yeah?" he called, his voice high. And then he threw something else that landed between my thighs.

I looked down. A tiny square shiny package. A lump in my throat grew. *Oh man. Oh man, oh man.*

I tore that package open and rolled the condom down my member. "Fuck, Ethan, I want you so goddamn bad, buddy."

"I want *you,* Jake."

"Ughh," I grumbled as I set my sheathed-tip at his entrance. "I'll go slow. It might hurt at first. Just try to relax, okay?"

"Okay."

"Tell me if it hurts too much. But I won't push."

I pressed my tip in, past his virginity. "*Oh* Ethan. Wow."

"Hell yeah, Jake." He whimpered and shivered, and I knew he'd been stabbed by a bit of pain. "I can take it."

I stopped and pulled back. He howled with pleasure – "Ohhhh yeah, Jake! Fuck that's good! Deeper!"

"Ungh," I grunted, pushing forward again.

He took me deeper. I worked my way, in and out, my hand between *his* legs and stroking his manhood. I loved the way his cock lunged with a deep heave every time he took me to new depths in his ass. Every time I went just a bit further, his whole cock throbbed in my hands.

Before long he could take all of me. And he *wanted* all of me, too.

"Harder!" he screamed. "I want it all! Harder, faster!"

"Fuck!" I groaned, trying to keep up with his demands, my thighs clapping into his lovely ass with each mighty thrust.

I wrapped my hands around his taut waist and pushed back against him as I belted in and out. The *rational* part of me was like a whisper among a chorus of screams and shouts and I couldn't hear what it said, much less care.

But as I fucked Ethan's tight ass – as he gave me *everything* he had, and begged me to give him the same? I couldn't help it. I felt a funny feeling. I knew he wasn't just a piece of ass to me. I liked Ethan

a lot. I was fuckin' crazy for him, even.

And maybe that's what scared me so damn bad. I didn't wanna lose him. As my apprentice, or even … well …

"Oh no!" I roared, feeling myself suddenly go over the edge, "I'm gonna cum!"

I pulled out and tore my condom off. Ethan flipped over onto his back. I squatted over him, one hand stroking my cock, the other stroking his.

"I'm cumming too! Wait! Wait for me!" he shrieked, his ass thrusting off the mattress.

"Uuurgh," I growled. "I'm – trying!"

I stopped stroking, but it was already too late. My cock was swelling up by the second, looking bigger and pinker and redder and the tip opening up, ready to burst. "Ethan!" I shouted in a panic.

His face scrunched up as he worked himself harder, faster, while I tried to buy every last moment I could. But my back was up against the wall, I couldn't stave it off much longer – and just when I knew it was about to happen, I saw that sweet smile, that look of relief and release, come to Ethan's face.

"Yeaaahh!" I moaned, letting go. I pumped my shaft, splattering a huge volley of my seed all over Ethan's manhood, his belly, his chest.

"Yes!" he hissed, stroking himself, until he popped a second after me.

Splat, splat, splat! He painted streaks of his own seed in long lines up and down his torso, our pearl-colored cum mixing and pooling on his heaving chest.

Tired, spent and exhausted, I fell forward and collapsed on top of Ethan. Our cream lathered up between our chests – mine hairy, his not-so.

"That … was … *amazing,*" he managed to blurt out between tired gasps.

"God," I panted. "You're tellin' me."

He stuck his hand between our chests and pulled it out a second later. He held his index finger up. He'd scooped a serving of cum up on his finger-tip. I'm not sure whose. Maybe his, maybe mine, maybe a mix of both of ours.

I watched closely, curious to see just what he'd planned to do with that. He put his finger to his bottom lip, smearing it across the top of that lip as if he were icing a cake.

"Oh man," I sighed.

"Tastes good," he chuckled, lightly sticking his tongue out to test it. "You wanna try?"

"Fuck yeah," I grunted. I leaned in and hungrily took his

mouth. His lips were already scorching and ripe with desire … but the bittersweet tang of our cream, caught between the desperate grasps of our wet and needy tongues, made our kisses *sinfully* hot.

We kissed until the hot, slick and salty taste of our seed was gone … and then he put some more cream on his lips. And we kissed long and deep and soon we were both hard again. And then Ethan was between my legs, sucking me off, his big sweet eyes on mine until he made me blow all over again. Of course he took it right down his throat, too.

“Dude, you made me cum twice,” I chuckled with disbelief. I hadn't done that in years.

I crashed backward, so tired and drained of everything now. My head hit his pillow and the smell of him swirled up, wafted all around me, and enveloped my senses. And I must have shut my eyes, because that was the last thing I remembered before I fell asleep.

25

– Ethan –

I poked Jake's shoulder 'til his eyes cracked open.

“Hey. I'd love to let you sleep more but I'm getting really hungry, dude. Plus you're totally killin' my arm right now.”

Jake blinked over and over as he took in his surroundings … and then he made a sleepy grunt. He rolled off my arm. “Thanks Jake. I bet you're hungry too?”

He looked at me and let out a deep breath. “Yeah … food would be nice …”

“What sounds good?”

“How 'bout some fast food?”

I clicked my tongue. “Wow, Jake. Really? Don't you remember what the doctor said?”

“Uh, I know he *didn't* say that I should never, ever eat fast food for the rest of my days.”

“The way you eat?” I poked at his impossibly hard belly. “God knows how you got to look like this.”

“Okay, so what did you have in mind for dinner, Jack LaLanne?”

“*Who*?”

Jake groaned. “Nevermind.”

“Another old person reference, I guess,” I tittered. “I was thinking I could make dinner. But I'd have to make a run to the grocery store first.”

Jake wiped at his face. “Oh, no, nevermind – that's too much work. And I really should get going.”

“Aw, really?” I pouted.

“Yeah,” he grumbled and climbed out of bed.

“Well, okay.” I didn't have a choice but to surrender to reality, after all. “I hope it's not my cooking scaring you off.”

“It's not at all,” he said softly. “The lunch you made me was awesome. I felt a lot better afterwards than when I eat Hungry Man.”

“Imagine that,” I quipped.

I watched as he slid his boxers on, then the rest of his clothes. I had a sinking feeling in my gut, the same way you feel anytime someone you like is leaving and you're not sure when you're going to see them next.

Well. I'll see him tomorrow for work, obviously. I mean, see him next … like *this.* Naked. And in my bedroom.

Jake put his shirt back on, and then he sat on the bed to put his boots on, his back turned to me. I slithered behind him and pressed myself into his back and kissed the nape of his salty neck.

“You know,” I said between kisses, “my friends found that epic hickey you gave me. They all think I've got a new girlfriend already.”

“Shit. Sorry.” He sat stiff as a board, trying to resist me. But that just made me want to tease him more. I draped my hands down his front side, my lips pressing and sucking on the sensitive skin of his neck, trailing my fingers under his shirt and going lower.

“Fuck,” Jake grumbled, wilting under my caresses at last. “I can't stop you, man.”

“Well why would you even want to?” I flirted.

Jake let out a deep sigh. “Listen, Ethan.”

I sat back. *Uh oh.* I knew that tone. I waited patiently for him to speak, but my heart raced in my chest.

“Are you *really* sure you don't wanna go to Chicago after all?”

I scoffed. “Uh, *yeah,* I am. Why the hell would you ask me that?” I took my arms back, folding them over my chest, and sat on the bed with a foot or two between us.

“I'm afraid you're about to make a mistake that you're gonna end up regrettin'.”

My eyes narrowed. “Which is *what,* Jake. What mistake?”

“Well …” He cleared his throat, speaking slowly – I knew he was choosing his words carefully. “We hooked up, and it's exciting and new for you to be with another man – I get that.”

"*But*?" I said with an air of impatience.

"But uh, you know. Maybe it's not … *for* you after all in the long run. Maybe you'd still prefer women. Maybe it's crazy for us to be doing this."

"Um, let me just remind you what happened in this bed only an hour ago: *You just fucked my ass, Jake.* Is that something I'd be doing if I weren't into this?"

He gulped loudly and tugged at his shirt collar. "I mean … I dunno … I'm just sayin'."

"You're just saying what? You're gonna have to help me out, because I'm not following."

"I'm saying – should we really, y'know, threaten our working relationship over some short-term fun?"

"Short-term fun," I chuckled to myself. "That's not really the phrase I'd like to use to describe it." My shoulders dropped and I looked away. "But maybe that's what it is to you."

Jake sighed. "All I'm saying is, you shouldn't put your life on hold just because of what happened between us."

"I'm not putting it on *hold,* Jake, I'm taking another path. Can't you see that?"

He looked over at me with sad eyes. "Huh?"

I shrugged self-consciously, ready to lay my cards on the table. "… Because I wanna see where things go with you."

Jake shook his head. "See, you're scarin' me when you talk like that."

"But *why,* Jake? Why is it so scary? If you don't like me then why would you come in here and … you know … do it with me in the first place?"

"Because I'm a *man,* Ethan, sometimes I can't … I can't control myself."

"Oh, that is such a bad excuse."

"Yeah, you're right, it is. And you're right – I *do* like you. But that's just the thing, Ethan. You're *young.* You've got your whole life ahead of you still. See, the older you get, the more locked down you get in life … you're not so flexible anymore. You can't do fun stuff anymore, like drop everything and move to Chicago."

I gave him a mad stare. "That's *such* bullshit and you know it, Jake. I'm seven years younger than you are. Big f'ing deal."

"Hey. Those are seven important years. You still need to travel the world … be broke and live in a foreign country. Fall in love with a stranger that you can barely even talk with."

I stifled a laugh. "Oh, because I'm sure *you've* done all that?"

"You're right, I haven't. Which is why I'm saying you should do it. I would've really benefited from figuring out who I was before I got

married …" Jake took a deep breath and paused.

"But I *know* who I am, Jake! Or at least I'm figuring it out! Okay, yeah, I just had a pretty wicked curve ball thrown my way … but I wanna spend my time with you! Why can't we do that?"

Jake stammered. "Man … I dunno! I'm afraid, alright? Afraid to get attached again to someone who isn't ready for this!"

"I *am* ready," I said, folding my arms.

"I have a *daughter,* Ethan. Are you ready for that? I have to be stable and reliable because she looks up to me, she depends on me! I can't go … falling in love … getting my heart broken … I can't do it anymore!"

"Well, I *told* you I wanna meet her, didn't I?"

Jake sighed. "It's not really the same thing … she's young and trusting and if it didn't work out between us, she'd be just as crushed as I would. If not more."

Not knowing what to say, I stared at my feet. I guess it was true. I didn't know what it was like to be a single Dad, or what it was like to bring someone new into your child's life … I guess I *was* just a kid in Jake's eyes. Too young, dumb, and immature to be good for anything more than a care-free fuck.

"Um, okay." A streak of worthlessness filled my guts. This had to be some kind of record for fastest transition from 'straight,' to 'maybe not so straight after all,' to 'totally dumped.'

I guess it was my fault for thinking me and Jake could ever be anything more than carpenters.

I sighed again. "Well, alright Jake. Fine. Uh. I guess I'll see you tomorrow morning?"

Jake stood up, ready to leave. "Look. Take the rest of the week off, alright? So we can let things kinda simmer down and clear our minds. Think it over. If you still are set on not moving to Chicago, and you still wanna work with me … *and* you think we can keep it professional, I'll see you Monday morning."

"What!" I stamped my foot. "Now you're *firing* me too? Jesus, Jake!"

"I'm not firing you," he said sternly. "In fact I'll still pay your wages for the wee–"

"I don't *want* money that I didn't earn!"

Jake pursed his lips. "Please, Ethan … just try to understand."

"*You* got me into this mess in the first place."

"I'm sorry. I really am. Believe me, I really … didn't want this to happen … I knew all along I never should've done anything with you …"

"Gee, thanks." I rolled my eyes. "Glad you held so strongly to that conviction that you'd come in here and fool around with me a

second time. Anyway, whatever, Jake. If you wanna go, you should go."

Jake turned and walked for the door. I was still naked, sitting on the bed, but a chill had set over me. Goosebumps covered my arms and chest. Before Jake walked through the door, he turned around and took one last look at me.

He looked sorrowful, almost regretful, and his eyes drank me in – his gaze sweeping up and down my body as if he had to take one more for the memory book. I almost despised him in that moment. He was a man afraid to even *try* for love, just because some bad experiences had scared him in the past.

But I couldn't be mad at him for long. Even if he did piss me off and break my heart all at the same time. Because the sad puppy dog look on his face said it all.

He *wanted* to try. He really did. But he was afraid. Just like he said. Afraid of getting burnt, afraid of being a bad Dad.

But I wouldn't let that happen … that's where he was wrong. I wasn't the *heart-breaking* type. If anything, that was *him!* I just wanted to get along … just wanted to be with somebody who I could be myself around. And that was him.

If only you could see it, Jake.

26

– Jake –

Sometimes you break up with somebody without meaning to. Without even *wanting* to. You don't know what's happening, you can't believe the words that are coming out of your mouth – but you hear them just the same. You know they must be coming from *some* part of you.

All I can do is cross my fingers and hope that the part of me that broke it off with Ethan knows what it's doing. That it's the part that has my best interests at heart, and wants to lead me down the right path.

Because when I heard myself dump him, all I could think was, *this isn't right.* Yeah, I'm scared about getting mixed up with Ethan for a lot of different reasons. But none of them are strong enough to make me wanna run for the hills – not yet. He's never done anything wrong.

And to do that to him after … after what we just did? Holy crap. That was a dirt-ball move. A *grimy* move.

My heart felt so sad, so heavy and rotten as I sat on that bed and tried to explain to him why we weren't a good match. My reasons basically boiled down to,

because you're young

and

because we work together

and

because I'm afraid

But that last one was really the *real* reason, wasn't it?

The week apart wasn't just for him. It was mainly for me. So I could get my head on straight. And stop falling for him.

Because really, that's what's happening here.

"Stop thinking about it, dammit!" I pounded my fist on the steering wheel as I drove back to my house. *Groan.* The more I thought about it, the worse it seemed. The only answer was to *not* think about it.

***

I called up an old friend, Jim, and asked him if he knew anybody to fill in for Ethan for the week. Jim immediately got real concerned and asked me what happened, told me how great Ethan is, what a shame it'd be for me to lose him.

I groaned. "He's fine, he just … had something come up and had to take the rest of the week off."

"Oh. *Whew.* I was worried for ya for a minute! Well, yeah, I got somebody who did work for me in the past. He's looking for a job right now and he does good work."

"Perfect. Give him my number. I need someone to start tomorrow."

His name was Ian. Ian said he could start tomorrow without a problem. I picked him up in the morning. Ian was good, like Jim said. I had absolutely no complaints about his work. A true professional through-and-through. Did his job, and didn't need to be told what to do.

And … still. Working with Ian wasn't the same as having Ethan around.

The week went by slow. Ian didn't like to talk during lunch like Ethan did – he liked to be in his own world, usually tapping away on his phone. I felt like I didn't know anything about Ian. Not that I really wanted to. I was too sad to find out.

Shit, I'm sitting here talking about what bad company *he* was – he probably didn't wanna know much about me, either. I was all quiet and moody and I'm sure I wore a permanent frown that whole week. I

felt lonelier than I realized. I guess sometimes, you don't miss something 'til it's gone.

By the time the weekend came around, I was nervous as hell that Ethan might decide *not* to come back to work for me.

I knew I needed him as my apprentice – that we were a great match.

But … was that all? Was there some other reason I wanted him around?

***

I had Belen that weekend.

"Got another!" she shouted happily as she reeled a fish in.

"Hey, good work!" I patted her on the back. "That's what, five already?"

"Yup!" She reeled the fish in and held it up. A nice crappie, medium but fat. "Thanks little guy!" She gave him a kiss before she turned him back.

I brought my fishing pole down with us, but for the life of me, I just didn't care enough to make any casts into the water. I just watched Belen instead.

"C'mon, Dad!" she whined. "It's not fun if you don't fish with me."

"Alright, alright." I flicked my pole and zipped my lure into the water. Belen kept taking peeks over at me, seeing that I wasn't my regular fishing-fanatic self. That my heart wasn't in it.

"Okay, Daddy, you're making that face again. What's wrong?"

"What?" I looked at her and laughed, purposely trying to make my face look carefree and happy. "C'mon. What face."

"That one. You can't cover it up. You look sad."

I sighed. "You're somethin', you know that?"

"What happened? Are you still upset about *Eeeethan*? Because he's going to move?"

I groaned, burying my face in my hands. Something about getting chirped by your 9-year-old daughter for having a crush on another man feels so school-house juvenile. And yet, she nailed it.

"Actually, for your information, *missy,* he's not moving after all." I folded my arms and turned my chin up at her defiantly.

"He's not?" Her face lit up. I couldn't believe it. She'd never even *met* the damned guy and she was already crazy about him. "So he's still gonna work with you! And you'll get to build the house after all!"

"Well," I stammered, needing to clear my throat. "Maybe. I'm not sure. He might not come back to work anymore."

"Oh," she said, and her gaze settled off into the distance. I knew she wanted to know more, but that she felt like maybe she wasn't allowed to ask more. "I sure hope he stays."

"Why?" I chuckled. "You haven't even met him. I could get someone else to work for me, you know."

She rolled her eyes. "Because when you talk about him, you get this funny smile on your face and you look happy and I like it. And I've already told you I wanna meet him someday."

He wants to meet her and she wants to meet him. And I'm the one telling everyone else it's a bad idea. What's the worst that could happen?

"Huh." I reeled my line in and made another cast. "Yeah. Okay. Maybe you can meet him someday soon."

She grinned. "'Bout time. I thought you were gonna get to meet my first boyfriend before I met *yours* …"

"Hey!" I roared. "You better not have a boyfriend."

She giggled. "Don't worry. I don't."

"Good. And Ethan isn't my boyfriend, got it? Don't you go and call him that or I might get real embarrassed."

"Don't worry. I won't," she said, making another cast into the lake with a sneaky smile.

Aw man, I groaned. *She doesn't even believe me. And if only she knew what a bone-head I am … she'd be real disappointed.*

After I took Belen back to her Mom's on Sunday night, I called Ethan. It took a few minutes of staring at my phone, with my heart thumping my ribs, before I could muster the courage to hit the call button.

After a few rings, Ethan answered. I let out a big breath of relief.

"Hello?"

"Hey buddy."

"Hey Jake. What's up."

"Just calling to make sure you still wanna work tomorrow."

"Yeah, I do," he said flatly. "If you still want me to work, anyway."

"I sure do."

"Okay." He paused. "And don't worry. I'll keep it professional."

His voice sounded so lifeless, so dead and full of hurt – and the thought that *I'd* done that to him? I winced, a stabbing pain splitting through my heart.

"Uh, alright," I croaked out. "See you at the usual time."

"Bye."

Click.

Keep it professional. I chuckled, turning that phrase around in my head. *Keep it professional.* When he said that, my only thought was

… *I wish you wouldn't.* But it'd be too easy that way.

It'd be too easy if he was persistent, if I picked him up tomorrow morning and he gave me a knowing grin and he said, 'hey, I know you didn't *really* mean what you said … let's just forget that ever happened. Want me to blow you on the way to work?'

Real life didn't work like that. And if it did, it probably wouldn't even be satisfying. I'd take it for granted. I'd think I could make mistake after mistake and he'd always take me back with open arms.

Now I had to win his trust – right after he gave it to me and I stamped all over it and told him I didn't even want it.

How crazy am I? I got what I want, only to realize it wasn't what I wanted after all. Even if I am man enough to admit that I made a mistake …? There's no telling. Ethan might have already moved on.

27

– Ethan –

Monday morning. Jake's van rolled up at the normal time. I walked out of the house and climbed in like always.

"Morning Jake."

"Mornin' buddy."

I hated feeling like this. With a cloud of darkness hanging over me. I knew I couldn't go on like this. I couldn't work with Jake if it meant pretending like I didn't want something more.

And that pissed me off. Because I felt like he'd opened me up and showed me this part of myself that I never knew existed … and I wanted to explore it, to know more about it. And I don't just mean simply '*I am a gay man,'* because it's more complicated than that.

In fact, the idea of getting with another guy besides Jake?

It doesn't really excite me. At all. If I have to keep my relationship with Jake business-only, I dunno what I'll do. The thought of going to a gay bar to meet other guys is just … man. I dunno. I'm not really interested.

Maybe Jake was right. Maybe I'm *not* into guys after all. Maybe I'm just into him.

The thing I didn't understand was … why was that such a bad thing?

Can't I just like what I like and not be judged for it? Does everything have to fit into such neatly compartmentalized little boxes with neatly-printed labels? Or can we just be human instead. With our many different emotions and feelings that, yeah, can sometimes get pretty danged messy and conflicting …

Sigh. Oh well.

I told Jake I'd work with him. But really, I know it's time to move on. I planned on finishing out this week, just to make *certain,* and then tell him he should find somebody else.

Jake put the van in gear and drove off. We didn't speak much. He made little noises, like *ahh* and *hmm* and it sure sounded like he wanted to talk about *some*thing, if only he could manage to bring it up. I knew I could ask what's on his mind. But I wasn't going to do the heavy lifting for him anymore.

I'd already tried that, after all, and Jake only ended up feeling trapped in the end. So, fine. If he wants to talk about something, he needs to find a way to do it.

Otherwise? I'm out. Life's too short to keep making the same mistakes over and over. I learned that with Johanna. We both could've moved on with our separate lives so much sooner than we did.

"So uh," Jake said at last. "We're going to this place out in Lockport. They want us to tear out their balcony and build a new one."

"Cool. That'll keep us busy for a while, eh."

"Yeah."

He drummed his thumbs on the steering wheel, his eyes darting left and right. *Man,* I wanted to help him – ask him what was bothering him. But I knew I shouldn't. So I didn't.

And the day went by. We did our work, minding our own business. Sure, we made a little small talk here and there. But it was different. Tinged by something – what? The disappointment of unmet expectations? The excitement of a new love, left out in the cold to die a cruel death instead of being welcomed?

I dunno. Dunno what it was. But we were two quiet guys and that whole week crawled by. And during that week, a balcony came down, and a new one went up in its place. I took photos like usual. The photos were for something I'd been working on for some time. My last project with Jake, as it were.

By the end of the week, I wasn't even sure if Jake had something on his mind, something he wanted to tell me, after all. Because a week is one hell of a long time to want to say something and not be able to say it. I started to think that this was just the new normal.

We hooked up – it happened. Jake got what he wanted. And

now he was acting quiet, weird, moody. Like the girls always talked about. How a guy would sweet talk them, get what he wants, and then suddenly he's a different guy.

If that was the case? If the Jake I'd fallen for was just a facade, and not the real one? Fine – I really wasn't interested anymore. 'Cause the *real* Jake – this quiet, nervous weirdo – wasn't all that appealing or fun to work with.

On Friday, Jake drove me back to my house. I was ready to tell him that I was going to move on after all. I'd either finish out my two weeks, or quit immediately if he wanted. His choice.

I took a deep breath as he pulled into my driveway. I was ready to speak.

But he spoke first. “Listen, Ethan.”

I looked at him and blinked. “Hm?”

“I'm sorry things got to this point, man. I don't even know what to say.”

“It's alright.” I shrugged. “You don't have to say anything. It's my fault.”

“No … it's *not* your fault. It's not anyone's 'fault'.”

“Whatever.”

He winced and rubbed his hand over his chest. “Man. I dunno how to say this, but … what are you doing this weekend?”

I looked at him in disbelief. I didn't want to submit to it. But I sure *felt* the creep of that awful, undying optimism tugging at my heart.

Some lame, childish part of me wanted to throw my hands in the air with excitement, thinking *oh yes, he does love me! He wants to hang out with me after all! Everything is wonderful, yay!*

But I refused to give in. I made my heart as tough as leather and ignored that desperately hopeful throb with every last ounce of willpower I had.

“Why?” I asked with disdain.

Jake nodded. “Well, 'cause, I got a project at home I need help with …”

“Oh. Right.” *Of course* that's what it was. Silly me. Getting my hopes up again. Which just proves that I can't handle working with him to begin with. “Actually, Jake … I think you should find someone else to help you.”

“Oh,” Jake's face went blank. “Oh. Do you mean – do you mean just for this? Or …?”

Ugh, why was he making this so much harder? Why did he look *hurt?* He didn't have the right to look hurt. He was the one who hurt *me.*

“I mean both, Jake. I don't think it's a good idea for us to work

together anymore after all."

"No," he whimpered under his breath. "Please. Just wait."

"I can't wait anymore, Jake. I've been waiting on the wrong things for too long. I dunno what I'm gonna do instead, but … I can't keep waiting around for things that obviously aren't for me."

"Wait wait wait," Jake pleaded.

I pulled out my cell phone. "Look. I wanna show you a project I've been working on for a while. I finished it up last week, when you had me stay at home."

I opened my browser and typed in the URL to a website I'd created. Or *internets* I created, to use Jake's terminology … which *used* to seem funny to me, but now it kinda pissed me off.

Jake was already reaching that point in my mind, I guess. Where all the things he did – things that I used to think were cute and funny and hilariously adorable in his old-man way – suddenly seemed the total opposite. Instead the things he did were *stale*, and not funny, and stubborn to the point of being self-sabotage … etc, etc, etc.

This was the process any broken-hearted person would recognize. The process of tearing someone out of the comfy little hole they'd burrowed into your heart. The hole they weren't allowed to occupy anymore. *No one* could occupy or fill that hole anymore – not in the same way. If they tried, it would hurt too much, it would remind you too much of the other person. That's why every time you fell in love it was different. Totally different.

Instead you had to back-fill the hole with concrete – hard, heavy, unfeeling concrete – and call it a day. And if you got your heart broken too many times, soon the whole damn thing was a concrete-filled sack of shit that couldn't feel a damn thing.

The website loaded on my phone. I passed my phone to Jake. "Here."

Jake squinted at the screen. "What am I looking at?"

"A website I built."

Jake scrolled through it. "Dude. It has my name on it. '*Jake Thompson Carpentry.*' Is this really my website? Is this really on the internet?"

Well well, look at that. He said it correctly for once.

"Yep," I smacked my lips plaintively.

"But why'd you do that?"

"I'd always told you that you should put your business on the web … where people can find you … that way people can look you up and see your work. I'm telling you, you'll get more work lined up this way."

"Dude." Jake chuckled. "It looks phenomenal, man. The before and after pictures … *whoa!* It really looks good. So that's why you

were always taking those."

"Yeah, well, you do phenomenal work." I shrugged, looking out my window. "Now people will get to see."

He reached for his wallet and thumbed through a stack of bills. "What do I owe you for this?"

I waved him off. "Nothing. Really. Call it a labor of l-- uh, I mean, call it a parting gift." I rolled my eyes at myself – almost saying the *L* word. That woulda been rich.

Jake's brows formed a sorrowful arch. "I'm not sure what to say. I mean, no one's ever done anything like this for me before. So … thanks … thank you so much."

"Don't mention it." I reached for the door. "Anyway."

"Wait." He put his hand on my shoulder.

Uh oh. Don't you dare ask to come in, I thought skeptically. *'Cause I'm not sure I'm even strong enough to say no. Even though I know I have to.*

"I mean it, Ethan. I need your help this weekend. Please. Just come by Sunday, alright? I'm starting a project and I really need your help."

I let out a sigh. "With what, patching up the roof that you don't even wanna fix? Can't you find someone else to help?"

He shook his head. "I could. But you're the guy I want."

"Damn it, Jake." I sucked my cheeks in. *Fine. One last chance.* I hated myself for giving in to that optimistic voice … but at least then I could say I gave it everything. "Alright. Fine. Sunday."

Jake broke out into a grin. He clapped me on the shoulder. "Thanks, buddy. Thanks a lot."

"Alright, Jake. See ya."

28

– Jake –

Ethan showed up ready to work Sunday morning. I heard his car pull up, and my heart raced, and I knew it was the moment of truth … or would be shortly, as soon as I could man up, anyway.

I went out the door and greeted him. He gave me a nod, his lips pursed together – he had that *Sunday morning church* stare to him.

And I understood that he *really* didn't wanna be here right now. That he was just doing it for me.

That made me sad. But I understood it.

"So. What're we doing?" he asked.

"C'mon. I'll show ya."

I walked him around back, behind the house. He saw the heavy machinery and gasped.

"What the hell? What are you doing out here?"

"I got all my permits in finally. Broke ground last week."

His face lit up, and for the first time in a couple weeks, I saw the Ethan I remembered. "You're really gonna do it? Finally? *At last?*"

"Yup," I nodded. "Finally buildin' the new house."

I saw Ethan reign in his excitement, a serious look returning to his handsome face. "Well, that's really good news, Jake. I'm sure you'll love the new place."

"Hope so. C'mon, lemme show ya what I've got done so far."

I walked him around. I hadn't done much yet – hadn't done *anything,* truly, but paid to have the lot cleared and excavated. After my foundation guy poured the concrete, then I could go to work on it. I pointed out to him where all the rooms were gonna go, where I was gonna run my plumbing lines and electrical, and everything else.

"Looks like it's gonna be nice," Ethan said. "Great view of the lake. All the trees nearby. Yeah. It's gonna be great, Jake."

"Thanks."

We both stood with our arms crossed, facing each other, more than a few feet separating us.

"But uh … what did you want *me* out here for?"

I scratched my head. "I guess I just wanted to show it to you. And have it be a surprise."

"Well," he chuckled. "I'm surprised, alright. So … is that it?"

"Um." I swallowed. "Yeah, I guess so. Well, I wanted to ask if you'd help me once the time comes."

He paused. "I'll have to think about it, Jake. I really don't know."

"Yeah, okay. That's fine." I frowned. "Sorry I made you come out here just for that. I guess I was excited."

"Aw, Jake. That's okay."

"Yeah. Shoot. Well, do you wanna hang out?"

"I dunno … is that a good idea?"

"Why not. Maybe you wanna eat some lunch? I made some food."

"*You* made food. What'd you make? Burgers with doughnuts for buns, and deep-fried Snickers bars instead of fries?"

"Har har." I rolled my eyes, but I was happy he was joking

again. “Actually, I tried to make something you'd cook.”

“And what would that be?”

“Well … er … I got some trout to throw on the grill … and broccoli … and some stuff to make a salad with.”

“Oh hey. Look at you.”

“Yeah. I wanna be healthy after all, Ethan. Got too much to live for to have my body go to shit.”

“Well thank God.”

“Yeah. I owe it to you. Now come on. Let's go inside and eat.”

***

Ethan had a hard time believing that I made this meal. I have to admit, it *was* pretty tasty.

“You. *You* made this.” He kept saying it over and over like he couldn't believe it. “It's *really* good, Jake.”

“Well, what the hell!” I said indignantly. “I looked up a recipe and followed it. It's not like it was all my idea. Cooking isn't *that* hard.”

“Well *yeah,* but that's what I've been telling you all along, and you wouldn't hear it…”

“Oh yeah. I guess so.”

But after we ate, there was that uncomfortable feeling again. That feeling of something in the air. Something we both wanted to talk about, but neither of us could bring it up. Well, I knew it was *my* job to bring it up, since I created this mess in the first place.

Just say something, Jake!

I didn't have a game plan when I invited him over. I really didn't. I guess I imagined that I'd show him the house, and then I'd say something smooth and romantic like, “maybe this could be our future together?” and give him a sexy, confident look.

And he'd be all smitten, and be like, “Jake, I'd love to live here with you!” And then we'd run off to my bedroom, and strip all our clothes off and fuck again – because damn, sex was really, really hot with Ethan.

But that was the fantasy and not the reality. And the reality was, I wasn't some smooth guy who could just sweep Ethan off his feet after the awful shit I'd said to him. I had a real hard time talkin' about my feelings. And it was really hard to admit I was wrong when I knew there was a chance Ethan could rub it in my face and say, 'yeah, you *were* wrong, idiot! And now you blew your chance!'

So instead I sat and got nervous, not knowing what to say. And once lunch was over, Ethan kept checking his watch. I didn't have anything else planned. I knew he was about to say 'welp, I should go,'

any minute now.

And then my phone rang. “Huh,” I said as I looked at the screen. “It's Kristi.”

I answered and talked to her. She said that she needed a huge favor, she had to be somewhere and Dean had to be somewhere else, and neither of them could take Belen, and could I just take her for a few hours?

I gulped, looking up at Ethan while I heard the news. “Um, yeah, no problem. Okay. See you soon.”

I hung up.

“What did she want?” Ethan asked.

“She needs me to watch Belen. Just for a few hours. She's dropping her off.”

“Oh. I guess I should probably go?”

I took a deep breath. “No. Unless you wanna go. But, I'd like it if you stayed. You said you wanna meet her, and she said she wants to meet you, too.”

“She did?” Ethan made a face. “She *knows* about me?”

“Yeah,” I grumbled. “I guess I talked about you more than I realized.”

Ethan nervously smiled and looked side to side. “Ha. Oh. That's funny.”

***

Kristi showed up half an hour later and dropped Belen off. Ethan stayed inside while I met them out front. Kristi thanked me and I told her no problem. She saw the machinery out back and asked me if that's what she thought it was.

“Yeah,” I laughed. “Finally.”

Belen freaked out. That girl was so happy.

“You're really gonna do it?!” she screamed.

“Sure am.”

“I'm so excited!”

“Me too, sweetheart.” I took her hand, waved bye to Kristi, and walked Belen to the house. “By the way, I got somebody you should meet.”

“Uh oh,” she grinned. “Is it him? Is it *Eeeeethan*?”

“Shh!” I tickled her neck. “Don't!”

I let her in and she walked right up to Ethan, not shy at all. “Hi! I'm Belen.”

“Hi Belen! I'm Ethan. I've heard a lot about you.”

“Are you gonna help us build the house?”

Ethan hesitated a beat and gave me a look before he answered.

"… Yeah, I think I am."

"Good! Dad was saying you might not help … that you might leave. And I don't think you should do that, 'cause he'll need help, and I think he likes you."

I resisted the urge to groan, and instead quietly rubbed my forehead.

Well she didn't say anything untrue, anyway.

I cut in before anything embarrassing got said. "Let's all look at the blueprint, whaddya say, guys?"

"Sure!" Belen cheered. Ethan nodded.

I rolled the plans out on the table and the three of us looked 'em over. Belen was happy I kept a lot of her plans in place, like the atrium and the sunroom and the loft bedroom. It was fun, the three of us sitting around that table making plans. I was really impressed by how openly she'd taken Ethan in. And how good he was with her.

She had to do homework, though. When her math book came out, Ethan was really impressed. "You're taking algebra? Already?"

"Yeah," she said matter-of-factly. "They have to send me to the junior high building for it."

"Wow. That's pretty impressive. I bet it's scary being around all those teenagers, huh?"

She shrugged. "Only at first. I'm used to it now. They're pretty nice to me, actually. The kids my age, though?" She trailed off, sealing her lips in a way that said it all.

"Mm-hm," Ethan nodded with understanding. "I remember those days."

"Did you get picked on?" she asked, her eyes lighting up in a way that said *no way!*

"Well, I was kind of a computer nerd. I was writing programs in 6th grade. Do you know what my last name is?"

"No."

"Mailhot. That's French, but it's spelled like *mail-hot*."

She cracked up. "I bet they called you Hotmail."

"Yup. Nailed it." Ethan grinned. "But trust me – it gets easier as you get older. You're going through the tough times now, but that only means they'll be over even sooner for you."

"Yeah, I guess," she smirked.

I told Ethan to show her the website he made. She was really happy that I finally had one and loved looking at all the different jobs we had and the funny stories we shared about each job or the kooky home owners.

A couple hours later, and Belen was feeling hungry. I got a little freaked out, I'll admit – lunch was a success but I'd *planned* that. I didn't know what to do in the heat of the moment.

But Ethan took a look through my fridge and my dry cabinet and settled on making a tomato-sauce pasta with asparagus. *Man,* that was delicious, and Belen loved it, too.

Before I even knew it, hours had passed and Kristi was back and ready to pick Belen up. She said bye to Ethan, that she hoped to see him again.

And then it was just us again.

Okay Jake. Now's the time.

29

– Ethan –

"Okay Jake, be honest. Did you plan on that happening?"

Belen had left me totally charmed. What a smart, cute kid. She reflected on Jake and Kristi so well as parents, even if they were split up.

"No dude, I swear. That was totally a last minute thing for Kristi."

"Oh." I kinda hoped he *had* secretly planned it, actually. It'd mean he wanted me to meet her. And that could only mean good things.

But there I went again, getting my hopes up.

It'd been a long day – a fun, relaxing day, but a confusing day, too. I wasn't sure what the hell these signals were that I kept getting from Jake. Because when you added the messages up from everything he'd said and done the past few weeks – nothing made sense.

'Cause right now, I felt like he was really happy at how I'd gotten along with his daughter. But only a week ago, he was telling me how we had to keep things professional. Well, I doubt there's too many professionals who hang out at their boss' house, meet their daughter, talk about their plans for the future … and all this after having secretly banged a week ago.

And then there was the issue of *work* tomorrow. Was I gonna work with Jake after all, or not? I didn't even know where we stood on *any*thing anymore.

Jake brought it up first, thank God.

"Listen, Ethan. I didn't just invite you out here to see the house and eat lunch and stuff."

"Then what?"

He sighed. “I just wanted to say … how much I loved working with you. And how much I even liked spending time with you outside of work. And … man. I don't want you to quit. But I also understand it if you have to.”

“I dunno, Jake. I really don't know what I'm supposed to do right now.”

“The truth is, Ethan, I realized I was wrong. And you were right.”

“About what?”

“About … us. I realized that I was pushing you away *because* I like you.”

I gulped. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. Well. Wow. Okay.” I needed a few seconds to gather my bearings and think clearly. “And so, what are you saying?”

“I'm sayin' …” he took a step closer. He reached out and took my hand into his. I looked up at him, wild-eyed, wondering what he was about to do. Because it couldn't be what I *hoped* it was … right?

“I'm sayin', I was wrong. I'm sorry for the shit I said to you. How I made you feel. I like you, Ethan. And I don't wanna push you away because of it.”

I tried to look stern-faced, so he wouldn't think I was *too* into him already. But I could feel my face beaming rays of happiness and filling the whole damn room with my shine. The warmth of his big hand, closed around mine, was more than enough to make me wanna scream with giddiness.

“But okay, what about how I need to travel the world, and all that bullshit?” I asked, trying to get my serious look back – taking my hand back, too.

“Well I stand by that.” Jake stood straight, crossed his arms, almost scowled.

Wow, he's sure attached to this idea of traveling the world in search of love.

But Jake eased up. “It's just, uh … ya know. I'd like to travel with ya. Someday. Who knows. Money, and all that.”

I chuckled lightly. “Are you even serious right now? Jake, you better not be pulling my fucking leg, 'cause you can't *fuck* with a guy like thi–”

“I'm serious, Ethan. I really like you. I want you to stay – not just as my apprentice but like, you know.” He lowered his head bashfully. “I, uh, want you to stay in my – my love life.”

Speechless, I gasped.

“But if you hate my guts, I don't blame you. And if you only wanna be my apprentice, and that's it, then that's okay too. I won't be

weird around you. At least, I'll try not to be weird. I know I was weird this week."

I grinned. "Yeah you were."

"Yeah. Right. Well, I'll try not to do that … if that's all you want."

"Hmm," I tapped my chin, pretending like I needed to think it over. Anxiously, Jake moved closer, a terrible look on his face – because he knew our fate hung in the air.

And that look of dread on his face? After what he put me through, I'm not gonna lie. I kinda enjoyed it! Because I already knew my answer … but it was good to see him suffer. That way I *knew* it was true. He did like me after all. He *was* willing to take a risk … at least I hoped so.

"So?" he asked nervously. He put his hands on my shoulders, squeezed me between them, and stared me dead-on. Like he was trying to look right into my soul. I felt snug and content between his big hands. "Do you hate my guts?"

"No." I chuckled and broke into a grin. "Of course not. Maybe I did a few hours ago. When I thought you were the biggest liar, or the biggest coward, alive. One of the two."

"That's fair. That's totally fair." He let out a deep breath. "I guess I'm a coward then. Because I'm not lying when I say I wanna see where we go."

My heart melted. "Jake …" I whimpered, grasping for words.

Before I knew what to say, he leaned forward and calmed my quivering lips. His kiss was so right, so calming – like a streak of sunshine piercing through gray rain clouds, it was a promise of better days to come.

But I tried not to crumple into *too* much of a broken mess in his arms. It was too easy, too tempting to get lost in the juicy caresses of his warm lips that just wanted to whisk me away. Even though I believed him, even though I knew Jake spoke from the heart, we *had* just been through some turbulent times. And that required … time apart. Time to let the muddy waters settle.

Falling apart just because he kissed me, just because he admitted what I already *knew,* would be kind of ridiculous. I had to be strong. I had to keep my pants on. No matter how much I wanted to kick 'em off and rush over to his bedroom.

But first I had to stop myself from kissing him. I pressed my hands against his muscled chest, pushing against him, trying to peel myself away from his luscious lips with every ounce of strength I had … but my mouth just wouldn't cooperate.

"Mmmf!" I whimpered into his lips.

Just … one … more!

At last I pried myself away, gasping for air. “Jake …!”

He gasped, his cheeks reddened, and desire in his eyes.

“What?” he asked with a sensitive whisper.

“I like you. I do. I really do. But we have to … go slow. I'm not sure about a lot of things right now, okay? I still need time.”

His bottom lip jutted out like a sad puppy dog.

Oh no Ethan don't feel bad! Don't feel bad! Walking away is the right choice!

“Okay …” Jake nodded with a sad but understanding pout. “I understand. You're right. It's probably for the best we take things slow.”

He walked me to the door. Opened it for me and gave me a smile.

God, he's so handsome, I thought to myself.

“Ugh,” I whimpered. “Just one more kiss.”

I threw myself back into his chest, my hands greedily sliding up his shirt and running all over his rippled torso. Jake wasn't ready for me, and I almost bowled him over, pushing him backward until he crashed against the wall with a guttural *oof.*

“Ethan,” he gasped, trying to hold himself back, even though now I wanted him to conquer me more than anything … what can I say? “We should really stop …!”

“You're right,” I growled with a nod, my hands tight around his muscular waist. “Just one more.”

“Ungh!” I whimpered into his mouth, stealing *one last kiss* after another from his manly lips.

“Ethan!” he panted. He pushed me away from him. “We have to stop! You said we should go slow!”

“Fuck it,” I said, and I yanked at the button on his jeans and popped it free.

“Ethan!” he gasped, his head banging against the wall. “Dude …”

I burrowed my hand down his boxers, the zipper on his jeans flying open. “Fuck it, Jake.”

“Dude! C'mon! What're you doing …”

“I don't even know,” I gasped, palming his member and loving the way it thickened between my fingers. “But I can't stop.”

“Oh no … Ethan … I don't want you to regret this!”

“I won't. Just – just one taste, Jake, then I'll go.” I whipped his pants down, and his boxers with them, in one fell swoop. His cock gave a silly little jump, rising with a pulse and then weakly falling back down. Half-hard and still growing in tortured bliss.

He gasped. “Ethan! … Ethan … think. We can still stop. We can go our separate ways and, and take time, and … and *oh no*.”

I would've laughed – if his cock weren't in my mouth. That's what the *oh no* gasp was from. His half-hard member sliding into the hot, sweet indulgences of my cheeks … my lips tightly wrapping around him.

Was I fool for going back on my word? For not giving us time and space to clam things down?

Maybe. Or maybe this was the fun part. The tempest in a teacup. When all our emotions are raging. Why pass all that up, just to be *sure* we weren't making a mistake?

There was some risk involved. Yeah. For us both. And that's what we were doing – putting our faith in each other. So we could take this risk.

Besides, I was pretty sure Jake wasn't in it solely for the ass. He'd said all the right things. A guy who just wanted to get his rocks off probably wouldn't be trying to convince me *not* to suck him off, after all.

And who could blame me? After so long of not even realizing that I could *do* this. And that it wasn't naughty or bad, and that it didn't change me as a person. I was just a guy. A guy who could like another guy. Maybe even love him … who knows.

I looked up at Jake. Gave him my innocent eyes to stand in stark contrast to the slutty way I slurped his inches deeper into my throat. He could only stare helplessly, his mouth hung open, his brows angled up in agony. We both knew we'd blasted past the point of no return. There was no *way* I was going out that front door and going on my merry way now. Not without a *lot* of frustrations getting blown off first, anyway …

Besides, there was something magical about having a cock in my mouth. Something … *power*ful. I wouldn't have expected that – I wouldn't have thought a man could feel so free or confident with a dick between his lips. Maybe it's because society told you it was wrong, and nasty, and unnatural. So I guess that's how I always thought it'd feel. If I even allowed myself to *think* about it.

But actually, having that throbbing, pulsing, sweltering *essence* of him in my mouth? There wasn't anything wrong or nasty or unnatural about *love* or *devotion,* or showing that to someone you cared for. In fact it was like a thousand pound burden suddenly lifted from my shoulders.

I loved the way his manhood felt in my mouth. The way I felt it getting harder and firmer with every slide between my cheeks. I loved sucking my cheeks in harder and harder until it was almost too much for him, and he wailed and groaned with some mix of pleasure and pain. And then I'd pull him out, his head swelling bigger and bigger between my pursed lips. Until at last I let my cheeks snap off it,

making a loud suction-pop noise that left Jake trembling against the wall.

Yeah. Yeah, all of that. That felt pretty right to me.

“Oh Ethan, oh Ethan, oh!” Jake panted. His hands grasped at the back of my head, my hair gripped tight between his fist. His hips pushed forward, not hard, maybe not even consciously. His hips were more like a pendulum, lightly swaying back and forth against my movements. He wasn't rough, he didn't push or choke me.

In fact I quite liked it. Feeling his cock plunge just a bit further than I might take him on my own. Riding up against the edge, that urgent point where I thought I might gag … only I wouldn't. I trusted him, I knew he wouldn't make me choke.

My mouth was wet, hot, slick. Tendrils of saliva dripped from his member, soiling the pants around his member. Jake stopped swaying to and fro, instead falling back, against the wall, weak and vulnerable. I felt him swelling, a bloated pressure in him about to erupt.

“Oh Ethan, oh Ethan … I'm so, so, so …”

Close? I thought, amused.

“Hnnngh!” he growled, his whole lower body spasming. I felt hot jets of liquid splatter against the roof of my mouth. I slurped him faster and deeper, his urgent cries like music to my ears, letting his cream trickle right down my throat.

I milked him for every last drop. When I pulled off him, he was panting and chuckling.

“Dude … Ethan … you're so incredible, man.”

“Thanks.” I grinned, wiping at my lips. His sweet and salty taste lingered in my mouth, and I wished it could stay there always. “I love your taste, man. I could do that all day.”

“Ugh. You know all the right things to say to a guy, don't you.”

I shrugged. “I guess?”

Jake bent over and picked me up off my knees. His hands went between my legs, and his eyes bulged when he found what he was looking for.

“Damn, man, you're hard.”

“Yeah,” I said bashfully. “I guess suckin' cock makes me really, really hard.”

“Man. C'mon.” He led me by the hand, excitedly pulled me through his house, leading me towards his bedroom.

Jake got me to his bed and turned his focus on me like a crazed animal, like nothing else existed. Impatiently, he yanked at my clothes, and I thought for a second he might actually *literally* tear them off of me. A few seconds later I was lying naked before him, my member hard and throbbing against my firm belly.

Jake took a step back and appraised me in my natural state. “Oh, man,” he sighed with awe. “You're perfect.”

“Stop,” I chuckled. “I'm not.”

“You are.”

And then he took off his clothes, and kicked off his pants, and then he was on top of me, rocking against me like waves crashing against the beach. He was hard again, never stopped being hard truly, and our hard members slid against one another as Jake pumped himself up and down my length.

“Oh, Jake!” I whimpered. I loved being under him, loved the sight of his massive, muscled chest; dotted with manly hair and glistening with his sweat and oil.

His weight pressing against mine made me feel so compact, so miniscule and unimportant – but not in a bad way. I'd just never felt so thoroughly *over-powered.* It was nice, in a way, to surrender control for once. And with Jake, it was an easy choice. He was, after all, bigger and stronger. To submit to him was only natural.

I reached down, my hand burrowing between our hard stomachs. I wrapped my hand around both our cocks. Grabbed both of our shafts with one hand and held them firmly. Jake grunted, gasped, and lifted his ass. Then he pushed it forward.

“Oh!” I moaned.

“Ungh!” he groaned.

Jake pulled back and thrust forward again.

“Fuck yeah!” “Yeah, buddy!”

Jake pumped himself into my hand. With each stroke, the sensitive underside of his cock rubbed against mine, making us both grunt.

Each thrust against my hardness opened me. Made me hornier. Made me want him more. I needed him. I knew I did.

“Fuck, Jake,” I whimpered. “I want you.”

“Yeah buddy?”

“Yeah.”

I took his hand and sucked his finger, wet it with my tongue. He knew what to do with it. He reached around and pressed his wet finger against my ass.

“Oh, Jake,” I sighed. His finger toyed with my sensitive opening, rubbing small circles that made my cock pulse. Slowly, but surely, I relaxed and loosened, my hole heaving and gaping wider.

“Put it in me, Jake,” I nodded, eyes locked on his.

He gulped. He fetched a condom from his night-stand and put it on. I watched impatiently, wanting nothing more than for that thing to be inside me already …

He mounted me in missionary again, my legs up and over his

shoulder, a bottle of lube in his hands. He squirted a dollop of the liquid on his fingers and pushed.

"Fuck yeah," I grunted as he eased his finger in. "C'mon, Jake. More."

His finger went deeper. "Unh!" I cried, squeezing myself shut on his finger, showing him how tight I could make it.

"Damn," he groaned.

"More Jake, more."

He pushed in to the knuckle. I wanted him. Bad.

"More, more, more."

He gave me a second finger. I was ready. I needed it. He pushed slow, steady, watching my face for a hint of pain or unease. I took a deep breath, exhaling as he pushed deeper, my free hand stroking myself.

"God it feels so good, Jake. I love it, I love it. More."

He swallowed. My pants, my moans, my whimpers had an intoxicating effect on him – I could see it in his thousand-yard stare. His eyes wide, his pupils dark, his breath heavy.

He pushed his fingers in slow, gently, afraid to hurt me. I thrust myself back against him, my ass crashing into his fist.

"*More*."

Jake gulped. He set his cock at my opening.

"Yeah, fuck yeah," I grunted. *That's* what I wanted. My legs over his shoulders, his hands squeezing my waist, I dug my nails into his ass cheeks and pulled.

Jake leaned forward, pressed in. Sunk his weight into me.

His cock, sliding into my tightness, spread me apart. My world opened, and Jake came right in.

"Fuck!" I sighed. "God it's good!"

He tried to pull back out, to ease in gently stroke-by-stroke, but I was mad. I was greedy and stubborn. I wanted all of him, now. My hands clutching as his ass cheeks, I tried pull him forward, to lure him into my tightness. He was long and thick, and I wanted *all* of him.

"God damn," Jake chuckled. "You want it, don't ya?"

"Yes!" I hissed. "I keep fuckin' tellin you, man, give it to me *har-- ooh!*"

The words died in my throat. They never had a chance. 'Cause Jake pulled back out – *all* the way out – and my pucker squeezed tight, a shockwave jolting over me, and before that wave even finished crashing through my body, Jake angled his cock right back in me. And he pushed. And he gave it to me hard. The way I wanted.

His belly pressed against mine, our lips slid against one another, as we grasped and clawed at each other. Jake pumped me hard, his hips like a piston, swinging back wildly before thrusting

forward with all of his might. His pelvis crashed into my ass, a raucous *clap* ringing out with each delicious stroke.

Soon there were no more words to speak, only the sound of bare flesh smacking together, of pleasured grunts and groans, of sighs and moans.

With Jake pushing into me, and with me pushing back against him, we became one at long last. The two of us pulled apart, just to experience separation from each other but only for a brief moment – and only so we could come crashing back together again and remember how right it was, how much we belonged together.

Like a horse rider giving his stud a kick with his spurs, I sunk my nails into Jake's back and pierced his skin. He reared back, a fire in his eye. I grinned deviously. And then I did something real evil – I dragged my claws down his flesh.

Jake threw his head back and roared. He gave me my punishment. Which was, of course, just what I wanted. He pounded himself into me harder, each stroke mighty and deliberate, like he was swinging a sledge-hammer. Under the hefty blows of his weight, my whole body sunk into the springs of his mattress.

Time compressed on itself as we made love at long last. It was sometimes sweet, sometimes angry, and sometimes everything in between.

But the thing that stayed the same was, at last, I felt like *his.* Like I belonged to him and no one else. Like I'd given myself up to him, truly, and wanted him to have all of me.

And maybe, somehow, maybe on some other plane of existence, Jake picked up on that. Because he stared deeply into my eyes as he slowly rocked in and out of me, and whispered,

"I love you, Ethan."

Those words took the breath right out of my lungs. I couldn't believe he'd just said that. I didn't even know how to respond. So I didn't. I hoped he wouldn't mind – that I wasn't ready to say it yet. But those words went right through me, went straight to my heart – where they sunk in and throbbed, growing with each beat, until a warm fuzzy glow enveloped my body.

He said he loves me. Whoa.

Meanwhile? Jake didn't slow down. His tip glanced over my prostate when he gave it to me just right. He found it, concentrated on it, and gave me deliberately long, slow, deep strokes – like a massage – and he must have loved to watch my face.

"Jake!" I screamed, and without even knowing it, a single burst of cum shot out. He'd rubbed me just right. A volley of cream sprayed out, painting a long streak up and down my torso. Jake licked his lips. "How'd you do that!" I cried.

Jake grinned. “It'll happen.” He leaned down, dragged his tongue up my torso, licked up my seed, my salty sweat. Then he leaned in and kissed me again.

What had I said earlier, about not crumpling into a pathetic mess? Forget it – forget it – I was done. With Jake's bigness buried in my ass, with my spunk on his tongue, with our tongues sliding and wrestling together … our tastes, our smells mingling …

My abs quivered with a sudden strain. “Jake,” I said, as if I had to tell him something important. “Jake. Jake, Jake, *Jake!*” Each time I screamed his name louder.

My quiver had built into a tremble. Soon my abs quaked, and the waves erupted lower until my legs thrashed under him.

“I'm cumming, Jake!”

Jake pulled out. A squirt of cum arced through the air, rained back down on my chest. Jake jumped down, his head going between my legs, and he buried my manhood between his lips.

“Jaaaaaaaaake!” I howled, losing myself to the suction of his cheeks. I busted open, my seed flowing, sucked right down his throat.

And then the words he'd planted in my heart found their way out again, and I shouted for the world to hear. “I love you, Jake!”

My manhood in his mouth, Jake's face lit up and he peeked up at me – if eyes could speak, his would've said “you really mean it?!”

And I nodded back at him as best I could, my face twisting with my climax.

Jake sucked me dry. Every last drop went right down his throat. And when that was gone, like a man obsessed, he cleaned the seed of my chest, too.

He'd fucked me silly. Claimed me with his cock. Over-sensitive, ticklish, giggly, I had to push him away and let my nerves return to balance. Jake didn't like that. He still wanted to be all over me.

“I'm sorry,” I chuckled. “I really, really – am so sensitive now. I need a minute.”

“It's okay,” he said, biting his lip. “It's just … you're so goddamn sexy.”

I frowned. “But what about you? You didn't get to finish …”

“You already made me cum once, remember?”

“Yeah, but … you were close too … I could tell.”

“Yeah.”

“You could … ya know.” I smiled sneakily and raised my eyebrows at him.

“Huh?”

“Jerk it. If you gotta cum again.”

“You *wanna* watch me jerk it, don't you?” He almost went to pinch my nipple and I squealed – then he remembered. Hands off, for

now.

"Yeah, okay, maybe I do."

"Alright." He flipped on his back, laid next to me, took his condom off and tightened his fist around his cock.

"Oh man," I sighed. There was something sexy about watching a guy touch himself.

Jake tugged himself slow. I liked watching. I liked knowing what he liked.

"Tell me what you're thinking about," I said softly.

"Thinkin' … about …" His skin made soft *fap fap fap* noises as he jerked his thickness. "The time I saw you get hard in the van … how much I wanted to suck you off right then and there, in my van …"

Fap fap fap.

"Oh fuck, that's hot," I whispered.

Jake's abs tightened. His hand became a blur, flying up and down his massive rod. He dug his heels into the bed and pushed, his ass rising and thrusting into his fist.

"Fuck!" he roared. "Yeah!"

He pumped his cock like a shotgun. Pump, *boom!* Pump, *boom!* Pump, *boom!*

I helplessly stared as he splattered his cum all over his rock-hard abs, his bountiful pecs. Until the last of his milk dribbled out and rolled down his thick shaft.

"Oh … *man* … that was hot," I gushed. "Dude."

"You're tellin' me."

I rubbed my hands in his cream. Smeared it all over his chest. I glazed his muscles, until his cream turned frothy. A frothy layer of icing all over his studly, sizzling muscles.

Jake laughed, watching my handiwork. "Dude. Look what you've done. You made a *huge* mess with it."

"It's not a mess if you clean it up afterward."

"Huh?" Jake looked at me – "*oh,*" he gasped as I dragged my tongue up and down his torso. I was gonna clean him off, one lick at a time.

30

– Jake –

I looked at my alarm clock.

Shit.

Ethan was all balled up. By the looks of it, I'd spooned him all night. He fit perfectly in my arms. I could tuck my hand under his knees, and keep him in that tight little ball, and keep him pressed in real close to my chest.

But now I had to make him not-so comfortable.

"Buddy," I said softly, shaking him by the shoulder. "Shit, man, wake up."

"Hm?" he stirred with a moan.

"We must've fallen asleep, Ethan. It's almost 6 AM."

"Wha?" he rolled over and yawned.

"Yeah. It's Monday morning. I got jobs lined up and everything this morning."

He sat up. "Damn."

"Don't worry. You don't have to work. I'll take you back home."

He gave me a sad look. "But I *want* to. Unless … you know. You don't want me to."

"I'd love for you to help. I just thought you might be too tired. Or need some space."

"Oh. *Whew.*" He put a hand to his heart. "I was afraid you were gonna be acting all weird and regretful …"

"Nah, man. I just don't want you to do anything you don't wanna do. Alright?"

"Okay."

We got up, had a quick breakfast, and zoomed out to town.

That day at work? Things felt right. They felt … *normal.* We joked around on the drive to town. We joked around at lunch. We also had periods where we didn't say a word to each other, because we were too busy swingin' hammers or cuttin' trim or just buried in our own work.

But that was a good sign. A sign that we could work together. What we did outside of work didn't have to get in the way. Even though I'm *sure* he felt the same thing I did: if I caught a glimpse of him just right, or if he passed by me and I got a whiff of his scent …

Images from last night flashed through my mind. Filthy images, naughty images. The sight of that beautiful man, with his pale and perfectly smooth skin, all splayed out before me. The feel of his cock spasming in my mouth, the taste of his salty seed shooting between my cheeks. The tight squeeze of his pink little ass, the seductive pull so strong on my thickness …

Okay, that might be a pretty big downside to working with

him, actually. One moment I'm making precise measurements and cutting. The next moment I've got a painful bulge in my jeans, and I need to take a sit-break before anyone sees what I got goin' on in my jeans.

But it's a downside I'm willing to live with.

After work that day, we came back to my place, where his car was still parked. I invited him in for a beer.

"Just a beer," I said.

"Just a beer," he agreed.

But maybe that wasn't realistic – since we'd been around each other all day. In front of strangers, in the privacy of their own homes. Pretending like we were nothing more than a carpenter and his apprentice. Pretending not to notice when the other picked up something heavy, his biceps and forearms swelling and glinting with sweat. Pretending like we didn't wanna drop everything, sneak off and bone in that client's unused guest bedroom …

One beer and fifteen minutes later, I was on all fours, spreading my cheeks for him, and he pushed in. I hadn't done that with Trevor. I always ended up on top of Trevor after one of our fights. It's just how we worked.

I wasn't sure if I'd ever bottom for anybody, actually. I thought that *maybe* if I met the right person, maybe I could be talked into it. But even then, only if they really, truly wanted it.

Besides that I just didn't care. Didn't think much of it.

Ethan, on the other hand? He didn't ask for it – he didn't even ask *about* it. We just had a beer, and we kissed. Kissing led to touching … and one thing led to another.

And then there I was. Bottoming for him. With Ethan, it was different. Some part of me did care. I felt like I had something to offer him. Something about that felt right. That I *should* give him everything I had. Because I wanted him to have it all.

"Fuck!" I yelped as he went deeper, my feet thrashing the mattress. "It fuckin' hurts!"

"Sorry!" Ethan chuckled. "I'll go slower."

He learned to go easier on me. It was hard at first, but I relaxed, and soon maybe I even liked it. That was something else I didn't expect. But I liked the feel of him. I liked his hands, squeezing and kneading my buns. The light sting of the little spanks he gave my butt. He got me into it. Got me begging for more. And then he really gave it to me 'til I was good and wrecked and never felt happier. Waves of unending bliss just crashed up and down my body for what seemed like eternity.

But eventually you gotta move on. You gotta go on with your own lives. So we cleaned up. I didn't want him to go, but we'd already

spent over 24 hours together. Even though it'd flown by.

"You really gotta leave?" I asked.

"Yeah," he chuckled. "Or else my roommate might file a missing persons report."

"Alright, alright."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah."

***

Those were fun days – in the beginning – all the running around. Pretending like we *weren't* a thing while we waited to figure out what we *actually* were. No one else knew we were a thing. Except maybe Belen, who kinda-sorta knew about us before *we* even knew it. But Ethan didn't stay over when I had Belen. He could come over, and we could do activities together. But that was something we had to promise each other – not to confuse Belen. I was serious about that. Even though I trusted Ethan, I didn't want to break little Belen's heart if it didn't work out between us somehow.

But those early days are always filled with the highest highs, the lowest lows. The excitement, the promise of a new relationship – of a chance at new love. It'd been a long time since I took a chance. Maybe even … never, truthfully.

I loved Kristi, like I said. But it wasn't the same. Not with Trevor, either.

With Ethan it was something else. It felt – true. It felt equal, and fair. We were mad for each other, and sometimes our craziness got all bottled up and exploded … but we were always on the same level. We never tried to hurt each other. That was nice. Real, real nice.

We were real busy, too. Even though we saw a lot of each other, it seemed like we never saw *enough* of each other. Between my business … and building my house … and all the new clients that rolled in, thanks to Ethan's website? We had a lot on our plate.

And Ethan really rubbed my face in it – that his website was bringing us so much business. He was right. I should've listened to him a long time ago. Referrals are still important, and word of mouth is huge in any business. But having all that stuff online, where people can actually look at it? It makes a difference. I guess more and more people are starting to look for things online before they look anywhere else. Can't say I really *agree* with it, but at least I had Ethan to help me through it.

I'm not sure where this is all gonna lead. Me and Ethan, I mean. If we're gonna stay together. I hope we do. I really like him, and I know Belen does, too. Some part of me might *always* worry that

he's too young, that one day he might be overwhelmed by a sense of 'wait, this isn't who I am!' and want to break it off with me.

After all – that was my experience. That's what I'd done to Kristi. I still feel real guilty about that. But she's forgiven me, and all I gotta do is forgive myself.

But every day that passes, and Ethan is still by my side … I get a little more confident. It's really just so *easy* with him. Even if we didn't start off so easy. We get each other. We're a good match.

Like I said, though. I don't know what the future holds. I dunno if we'll be able to work together *and* be together. That's a lot of time for any couple to spend together. I bet there'll be someday where he throws up his arms and says, *enough, Jake! You keep working, I'm getting a new job!*

One thing's for certain, though. We're gonna have the house done by the end of the year. Ready to move in and everything. Then we get to demolish the old house – that'll be fun. Belen is excited for *that,* too.

But when the house is ready to move into? I want Ethan to move in with me. With *us.* So yeah. I've got some big plans. Big ideas on what's to come in the future. And every day brings us closer and closer.

31

– Ethan –

Spring flew by, and Summer right after it, too. We were busy in those days – working non-stop. More and more jobs were coming in as word started to really spread of Jake's work. He always says “It's not *my* work, it's *our* work!” … which is cute, but, I don't have any delusions about it – he's the expert!

As soon as our work days ended, we rushed back to Jake's place and went back to work on his new house. We'd work until late, until it was *too* late, and then we'd come in all tired and sore and we'd eat whatever we could. And most nights I was just too tired to go back home, so I just cleaned up at Jake's, and then I'd jump in bed and even though we were *both* dead-tired, we always found a little leftover bit of energy … and then we were *really* wiped and we'd fall right asleep.

During the weekends, Jake brought a few of his carpenter buddies over to help us. When it was Jake's turn to have Belen, Jake and his crew would work on the house and I'd keep her company. During the Spring I helped her with the project she'd been super excited about – a new garden for the new house.

She wanted a huge vegetable garden with tomatoes and melons and squash, and an herb garden so she could make her own homemade herbal teas.

"Why didn't you have a garden before?" I asked her.

"'Cause I just *know* that Dad wouldn't keep it alive when I'm not here!" was her answer.

I had to laugh. Yeah, Jake didn't have the greenest of thumbs … but the implication was clear: she knew I'd be able to take care of the garden for her. I gladly leaped at the chance, too – the kid was putting her trust in me and I didn't want to let her down.

We also built a compost bin out of some scrap wood. That meant we had to educate Jake on what went in the compost, and what went in the trash. And when Jake abused the same old joke – pretending like he couldn't remember if bacon grease and fat trimmings and old shoes went in the compost or the trash – Belen and I crashed into each other with agitated but loving groans. And Jake just snickered quietly as he put the trash where it belonged.

"He's such a *troll*," Belen always said about her Dad. Ha!

For as much as I was around, and for as much quality time as I got to spend with Belen, Jake wanted to make sure we didn't confuse her. That meant I had to go home during the days Jake had her. She knew we were seeing each other – and she made that fact increasingly obvious until Jake had to admit to her that, *yes, I'm dating Ethan.*

I was afraid that might change the way she acted around me, but it didn't. Still, the rule stayed the same – no sleepovers, not until we were something 'more serious.'

I wasn't sure what exactly he meant by that … but I could respect it all the same. Just like he wanted Belen to respect the fish she caught by kissing them, he wanted her to have a healthy understanding of love and relationships. So at the end of the day, I gave her a kiss on the cheek, and Jake a kiss on the lips – and Belen would giggle and go *oooo!* and then I'd be out the door.

***

When the Summer came, Johanna and our friends were excited and ready to move to Chicago. I got to spend a lot of time with them beforehand, especially Johanna. And while I didn't tell my friends who that 'mystery girl' was, the one I spent all my time with, I did tell Johanna.

She said she knew something was up from the get-go. That I seemed a lot more at ease and fun and less frustrated than she ever remembered.

"She must be some really great lay, huh?" Johanna asked. She

wasn't jealous. Just worried that she hadn't been 'adequate.'

"Aw, it's nothing like that, Jo."

"C'mon Ethan, who is she?"

"Okay … promise you won't tell?"

I figured I'd "come out of the closet" someday, when I was ready. But right now the only person I really trusted was her. And while she was shocked at first – she quickly accepted it and said it made a lot of sense. I hadn't told her *who* my man was. But she quickly guessed it right.

"It's Jake, isn't it?"

I grimaced, afraid that the truth would hurt her. After all … she had been jealous of the way I looked up to him, and how much time I spent with him.

"Um," I stammered and nervously ran my fingers through my hair. "Yeh. It's Jake."

"Ha!" she laughed. "Don't feel bad. It makes me feel better, in a way."

"Really? How?"

"I dunno, it just makes everything make sense. And besides that, it's kinda hot when you think about it …"

"Oh, please!" I laughed.

"Whatever – guys are always talking about how *hot* 'lesbians' are. It's only fair that girls can talk about men like that too!"

I laughed, seeing her point.

I was sad to see her go – sad because she represented such an important part of my life over the past few years. But, she was more than ready to move on to the next chapter of her life – and so was I.

Part of me will always wonder what would've happened. What would've happened if she hadn't asked for a break that one night? Would I have gone to Chicago dutifully, trudging forward through some life path that *wasn't* really what I wanted, wasn't really my true path?

What would I have done? Who would I have ended up with? I think I'd be mostly okay with Johanna. But it'd definitely be *different.* Just not the same. We got along fine, but we didn't *love*-love each other.

Or, an even bigger question: what would've happened if I *hadn't* met Johanna. I don't have any regrets – none at all! I think where you're at in life is exactly where you need to be – always and truly.

But it's still interesting to think about, isn't it? Like what if I hadn't met Johanna. What if we hadn't hit it off – and by hit it off, I mean, had she not been lured in by … what I *now* know … was my obvious disinterest in women?

That's why I stood out to her, after all – because other guys were so attracted to her, they were rude and crude. Made her feel like all they wanted was to get in her pants. And then – then there was me. Little ol' shy me. Going through some kind of a personal journey of awakening, trying to figure out who I was.

Maybe, if I hadn't met her, that Steven guy would've come to my dorm room one night after all. Maybe I would've let him in, like I sometimes fantasized about, and I could've 'practiced' my kissing on him, late at night, in the privacy of my dorm room while everyone else was asleep. Maybe I'd practiced some *other* skills on him, too. Maybe that would've been my eureka moment – and I'd have known I was gay. Maybe I'd have stayed in college, and ended up going down some path that would be just as confusing in the long run …

Who knows! It's fun to think about.

But like I said – no regrets. Because if any of that would've happened, *maybe* I never would've met Jake. And that's really the important one. Because I found the *one* guy that really, truly matters.

***

By the end of Fall, we were putting the finishing touches on the house. Jake and I were both burnt out beyond belief – working long days and barely getting a moment's rest. But it was sure nice to see that house come along, and know that soon Jake could move in.

When that day came? Jake took me in and walked me around, showed me the finished place. I'd already seen it, of course, so I wasn't sure why he was acting all giddy and nervous about it.

“Check out the view of the lake, Ethan!” he said. I laughed. It *was* a great view, right from the dining room table. But of course I'd seen it a million times already.

“I know, Jake, it's awesome.”

“Isn't it?”

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “What's with you?”

“It's just … I love that lake.” He shrugged. “Why don't we walk down there and watch the sunset?”

I laughed. “Uh, sure, man.”

We went out the back patio door and stood by the lake, watching the sunrise, arm in arm.

“This is where we had our first kiss, you know.”

I rolled my eyes and pinched his butt. “Of course I know.”

“*You* kissed me first.” He chuckled. “The straight guy. Imagine that.”

“Only 'cause I thought *you* were going to kiss me first – but you chickened out. Can't get a guy all excited he's gonna do something

and then not do it."

"Yeah," he agreed with a curiously anxious pant. "I'll agree with that."

Then he turned me to face him, just as the sun was starting to go down over the horizon. I gave him a curious look. And Jake went down on his knee.

"What're you doing, Jake," I asked flatly.

"Ethan," he said softly and grabbed my hand. "The whole time we were building that house, all I could think about was how I wanna start a new life in there. With you. Will you marry me?"

"Jake!" I panted, almost not even believing it was really happening. But sure enough, he pulled a ring out and held it up to my hand. The light from the setting sun glinted off the gold band. "Oh my God, Jake! Hell yeah I will!"

Epilogue:
Three Years Later

Ethan heard Jake's van roll up the gravel driveway – and that meant his work day had ended.

"Yes," Ethan hissed under his breath and pumped his fist. He shut his computer down and raced downstairs to meet Jake outside.

Jake pushed the van door open and climbed out, stiff and lumbering after a long, hard project. His hair was dusted with sawdust, as always, and his muscular arms looked sore and swollen after a long day.

"Aw, my poor guy!" Ethan chuckled when he saw how stiff Jake walked. "What the hell's got you so stiff today?"

Jake grumbled. "That barn project … framing the skylights and the new windows … lots of heavy lifting today."

Jake's health had turned around ever since Ethan made sure he started eating healthy. His doctor could barely believe how quickly his cholesterol numbers had improved. But every so often, Jake would come home sore as hell and in serious need of a massage.

As far as Jake's diet? Well, as it turned out, Jake actually *liked* to eat healthy – and he made some vegetable smoothies that even Ethan couldn't stomach. The fact that Belen grew a huge part of the household's vegetables during the summer months really helped get Jake into it. It was a project for the whole family.

Ever since the new house was built, Belen spent summers with Jake and Ethan. She was entering her teen years now and said she liked the quiet the country had to offer. She'd often disappear on hikes or spend hours staring at the lake in contemplation. Even though she appreciated her quiet time, Belen still had her dance classes and social events in the city – thankfully, after the turbulent middle school years, she'd really adjusted and 'fit in' with the other kids in her grade.

"C'mon, let's get you inside," Ethan laughed, putting his arm around his husband.

"How was your day?" Jake asked.

"Good … good … I was so far behind on accounting … but I got the books for the past quarter all straightened out." Ethan let out a breath of relief. "So I'll be good to help out again as soon as you need me."

The business had really taken off over the past few years. After the house was built, Jake and Ethan thought they'd have more time to themselves – and they *did,* but the jobs kept coming. Eventually Jake needed help – not just with the carpentry, but keeping up with the book keeping.

Jake had always kept records by hand. Ethan, of course, was aghast at the amount of time and work Jake was spending book-keeping 'the old fashioned way,' when he could have been using a computer instead. So Ethan came up with spreadsheets, and graphs, and accounting software and all sorts of things that Jake had no idea how to use.

"Dude," Jake had laughed when Ethan showed him one of his latest spreadsheet designs to track their accounts receivable and payable. He raised his palms and shook them at the computer. "This is *way* beyond my level, man. Looks like you just got yourself a new part-time gig."

Ethan nodded. "Well, yeah, I was planning on doing it anyway …"

So that was the arrangement: Jake was the brawn and the expertise behind the operation, but Ethan was the brains who kept things running smoothly. And while Ethan often still helped out on-site, he often had to sit back and stay at the home office to get all the books up-to-date.

But the important thing was, it made their lives easier. Jake could do more work for clients and they were making great money.

"Tell me about your new apprentices," Ethan said while he rooted through the fridge, in search of inspiration for dinner.

"Oh, man," Jake laughed. "They're not as good as you were. We can just leave it at that."

Ethan peered over the refrigerator door and winked at his

lover. “Hope they're not as hot, horny and confused as I was, either.”

Jake acted like he might vomit. “*Trust* me, they're not … not that it matters.”

“Why wouldn't it matter?” Ethan flirted, fishing for compliments.

Jake grunted. “'Cause I already got you and I don't want anybody else!”

Ethan chuckled. “So smooth. So romantic.”

“Ahhh, hell.”

But Ethan wouldn't have it any other way. As much as he teased Jake for it, he loved the way his husband sometimes stumbled over his emotions, struggled to speak from his heart. It was cute. To watch him try. And that was the important thing – that he tried.

“I'm just kiddin' ya, Jakey. I love ya.”

“I love you too.”

Ethan's frying pan roared as he tossed fresh spinach into the oil and garlic. Jake waited for the noise to quiet and then asked him a question.

“So, uh, you really haven't noticed anything strange when you did the book-keeping, huh?”

Ethan looked at him skeptically. “Uh … not really … *why?* And why have you been asking me that for *months?* Are you cooking the books?”

Jake grinned. “Mebbe.”

“What do you mean, *maybe*. Tell me what's going on in that head of yours, Jake.”

“I've been embezzlin' a little bit.”

“Embezzling from your own company.”

Jake nodded. “Yup.”

“Why the hell, Jake?”

Jake snuck up behind Ethan and wrapped his arms around him in a bear hug.

“'Cause I thought it was time we go travel. I've been settin' money aside for a while. Whaddya think? Italy? Spain? Germany? Where ya wanna go?”

“Oooh,” Ethan grinned. “But I thought I was supposed to do that *without* money, and I was supposed to fall in love with foreign strangers that I couldn't even communicate with?”

Jake gave Ethan a mighty clap on the ass. “Not this time. You're goin' with *me*, and we're takin' plenty of *money* and we're gonna stay at fancy hotels and you're gonna fall in love with me all over again. Got it?”

“Fine,” Ethan chuckled. “I guess that doesn't sound so bad.”

###

THE END.

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Forever Home

By Rory Wilde

One – Tyson

Tyson's fingers and palm burned as the leash slid through them. "Come on, honey, wait up," he said, holding tightly against the eager dog while he fumbled with the gate to the dog park. A ping sounded from his pocket.

As soon as the latch clicked on the fence, he trotted into the park, Leah leading the way. When she saw that he wasn't following as quickly as she'd like, the Labrador mix turned around and gazed up at him with bright, inquiring eyes, slightly glazed over with cataracts.

"Sorry, hon', I have to check this." Tyson took a moment to unhitch the leash from Leah's collar, and the old dog bounced around him as if she were a puppy while he checked an email on his phone.

The board was supposed to have sent out the final draft of the budget proposal. It was tedious stuff, but critical to running the Redwood County Animal Shelter. Tyson scrolled through the document, looking over the final edits as Leah decided to run laps around the perimeter of the fence.

He quickly tapped out a reply: *Looks good, Sandra! —T*. He slipped his phone back into his pocket and hung Leah's leash on a railing, going off to play with her. She'd gone all the way around the park once by the time he'd finished and was back by his side again.

The big yellow Labrador mix was blessed with excellent overall health. While she preferred to sleep and simply lounge around most of the day, she was up for playing whenever Tyson took her out. He found a newish tennis ball and waved it in front of her, laughing at her enthusiasm. She was honest to goodness the perfect dog.

She would be ideal for a family because she was so calm and friendly, but it was unlikely she would get adopted simply due to her age, which was clear on her face: the graying muzzle and whiskers betrayed her years. It was hard to see such a lovely creature get passed over so many times, but it happened.

Tyson jogged after Leah as she ran for the sheer joy of it. She stumbled every so often and Tyson kept a close eye on her. But despite her age, she was fairly agile, and he wasn't too worried about her getting injured.

He threw the tennis ball a couple more times and she returned it like clockwork, but he could see her energy waning. She was panting heavily, practically winded, when she brought the ball back

this time. He got down on his knees in front of her, pulling her in for snuggles and a hug. She panted happily, her tail moving side to side as she received Tyson's affection. When he pulled away, she darted forward to lick his face.

"I know, honey, I love you too," he said, returning her grin. He stood up and walked back to the gate, Leah trotting behind him. She sat patiently as he affixed the leash to her collar, and they headed back into the shelter.

It was a slow weekday, which was normal. Weekends were a rush because people who worked during the week could only come to look at animals then; the shelter kept 9-5 hours. And the college students from the nearby university primarily came in to volunteer on weekends. Tyson enjoyed the weekdays, as they allowed him to spend more time with the animals.

He took Leah back to her run, knowing that she would be hungry. And it was time for her to get fed, anyway. After setting the latch, he went to the storage room where they kept the food and other supplies. His coworker, Tina, was already there.

"Hey, Tina," he said. "I'm here to help with all the dogs in the first runs."

"Thank you! I thought I was going to have to do it myself." She smiled.

The petite woman was strong, but the enormous bags of food were bulky and best handled by two people. He helped her pour some kibble into a bucket, and they started using a scoop to dole it out.

"We just have this last bag left," she said, her mouth twisted into a dissatisfied grimace. "I hope we won't have to ration it out."

"Don't worry about it," said Tyson. "Our next installment will come in at the end of the month. And it's nearly the start of the county's fiscal year. They'll have to approve that damn annual budget soon."

"Does it look good?"

Tyson could see the worry in her wide eyes. He smiled reassuringly. "We have plans to spiffy up our storage facilities, expand the dog runs… It's going to be good."

Tina grinned. "Really? I mean, I don't want to be rude, but this room…" She waved her hand.

She was right. It was functional, but it looked run down. They'd had to jury-rig some shelving and containers, and it was always a struggle to fit everything in, like Tetris. They managed, but this room needed some organization.

"That's in the budget," he said. "As well as some improvements for the training room."

"Thank God," she said. "But I thought that they were just

going to approve the minimum we needed for operations."

Tyson shook his head, unable to hide his enthusiasm for the plans he and the other managers had created. "They told us to put in some extra requests," he said. "I mean, it might not happen. But we're hopeful. This room is at the top of the list, as well as the runs, but if we get more…"

Tina's shoulders relaxed. "That's a relief. It really is. And here I was thinking we'd have to find more foster homes or something."

"Oh God, no," said Tyson. "No. Keeping the dogs here is a priority, and we'll be able to do that."

Tina smiled, her expression now at ease. "Thanks, Tyson," she said, carrying a smaller bucket of kibble out.

"No need to thank me," he said, picking up his own bucket.

They made to leave, Tyson pushing his weight against the heavy door to hold it open for Tina. He let it close quickly; visitors sometimes came down this corridor to see the runs on the end, and he didn't want them to peek in and see the disaster that was the shelving.

He entered the row Leah was in and started serving the dogs. They gazed up at him with hopeful eyes, tails wagging vigorously, some rearing up and placing their paws on the run doors. It was loud in here. When one dog started barking, you soon had two, and then it was the whole damn place.

As he fed each dog, he carefully initialed the clipboard hanging by each of them. Tyson was diligent about doing this. In a shelter with so many animals, it was important to make sure everyone got as much attention as possible, so he had all the staff initial every day if the animal got interaction. That way, no one would get left out.

As he headed back to get another bucket of kibble, he replayed his earlier conversation with Tina. He was feeling enthusiastic about the budget; Sandra had certainly made it sound like they would get funding for all the extra projects. But the bottom line was that running a shelter was a precarious operation. The government always gave them enough money to keep it open; that was a given, considering how important having a shelter was to the county. But there had been years where things were tight. They had had to rely on private donations to even get the dogs fed and keep up the volunteer program, both of which were critical.

He hoped this wouldn't be another one of those years, but it was always hard to tell. Submitting the budget was ultimately a crapshoot; you could never tell what would come out on the other side. He could only hope they wouldn't have to beg the local philanthropists for funding to do something as basic as mend leaks. And even Tyson needed his salary; he had taken pay cuts before, and it wasn't ideal.

Now that he was done feeding his half of the runs, he had a little extra time to look in on two little guys who were new arrivals to the shelter. Thankfully, the little dogs were going to be snapped up quickly because they were puppies. Puppies rarely lasted more than a couple weeks at the shelter because they were in such high demand. But he still wanted to get to know them so he could make a good match.

There was a lot more to adopting out dogs than sizing up prospective pet owners. Part of Tyson's job—and what made him so good at it—included ascertaining the personality of each individual dog, so he could make good matches. A more energetic, trainable dog would be great for a sporty person who wanted a jogging partner, while a calmer dog would be ideal for an older person who wanted a companion.

But it wasn't as simple as determining temperament. There was something intuitive to the process. Dogs were individuals too, surprisingly complex, and Tyson had just the knack for understanding, on an almost subconscious level, what made them tick. He hadn't yet had any new dog owners bring their dog back because it turned out to be a bad match, and he was proud of his track record.

As he walked past the cats, he chuckled. He liked them well enough, but he didn't quite get them like he got dogs. They were more inexplicable, their motivations written less clearly on their faces. Thankfully, there were some good staff and volunteers at the shelter who showered them with attention, as devoted to them as Tyson was to the dogs.

And then there was the small animal room. The shelter didn't get much of anything but dogs and cats, so all of these critters got lumped together. As a manager who primarily worked with the dogs, Tyson didn't spend much time with them—there were some volunteers who specialized in working with exotics, as well as a manager assigned to them—but he did pop in from time to time, fondly remembering the two rabbits he had had in his sixth grade classroom.

He slipped into the room where the puppies were being kept in a playpen and stepped inside it, taking a moment to clean up a puddle. Messes never annoyed him like they annoyed some others, which was a blessing—he'd have had a hard time working here if they did.

The puppies were only now learning to interact with humans, but they were curious and cuddly, and they stumbled over to him, crawling into his lap. They were both boys, and were approaching the age at which they'd have to be neutered and get some more shots. After that, they'd be ready to adopt.

Tyson observed them as they vied for his attention, trying to figure out what breeds they had in them. It was a total guessing game with some of these dogs, as combinations of some breeds turned out to look like others entirely. But the merle fur, floppy ears, and overall shape made them look like their dad had to have been an Australian Shepherd.

So that meant they'd be pretty sweet-tempered, intelligent dogs. They'd be energetic and easy to train, perfect for adopting out. One of them seemed a little bolder than the other, which was normal—there was always a dominant one, he'd noticed. The other seemed more content to curl up in his lap and try to chew on his shirt.

"Hey, hey," said Tyson, working the fabric away from the puppy's mouth. "I know you're mouthy. How about this?"

He picked up a bright purple rubber bone and placed it in front of the puppy, who went to work on it as if he hadn't been interrupted. Tyson couldn't help but laugh.

He also couldn't help but think of Leah. She was just as playful and good-natured as these guys, but she wouldn't garner attention simply due to her age. If he didn't live in a place that disallowed pets, Tyson would have brought her home with him the instant they became friends. But the condo was the only place he could afford, and apart from that stipulation, its location and features were perfect. It was so close to the shelter, so he saved on gas—an important detail in a nonprofit worker's budget.

Maybe someday.

For now, it was enough that he got to spend time with all the pups at the shelter. He looked down to see that the shyer dog had started to doze off in his lap. His heart melted, and he knew right then that he was going to develop a soft spot for this one.

It didn't help that they came from a tough situation. Their mother had been the victim of a disgusting backyard breeding operation, and they'd been found in a filthy crate, with dirty water and little food. The mother had been placed in an experienced foster home, as she needed closer attention due to her myriad health problems. Tyson's blood still heated up when he remembered their condition when they had arrived at the shelter.

But they were safe now. They were going to find homes. The puppies were adorable and sweet, and the mother was young enough that she'd find a home easily. They'd be okay.

He checked his watch. It was about time he headed home. As much as he enjoyed working at the shelter, he needed his own space. He kept his condo neat and clean and organized, a haven from the noise and chaos of the shelter. But it felt lonely sometimes, and not just because the landlord didn't allow pets.

He got up and sighed, making sure the puppies had clean water in their bowl. He initialed their clipboard and made a couple of notes about their temperaments, then headed to the back office to grab his jacket and keys, noting how cluttered this room was as well. The conversation with Tina earlier had made it apparent to him that the shelter really needed the funding. They had only just managed for too long.

But the budget proposal would go through. It'd be okay. And they'd be set again for another year.

Two – Jack

"Which one do you want?" Jack asked patiently. "You can have any color you like."

He was crouched down to Mia's level, watching her consider the choices in front of her. He was trying to hide his frustration, but it was getting difficult. Mia was not a decisive child.

She blinked at him, lost, uncertain of which color of blanket to choose. Jack had read that allowing adopted kids to pick out their own things helped them feel more secure. But so far, that hadn't been working at all with Mia. The choices seemed to overwhelm her.

"How about purple to match your cushions?" he suggested. "Or maybe pink to go with the canopy on your bed?"

She seemed to be a little more focused now, and stepped forward to feel one of the blankets. "I don't know," she said finally, sounding just as frustrated with the situation as he did.

He was scared to make a choice for her because he didn't want to seem like he was intruding on what should be the decorating of a space that was all her own. But then, she was only seven years old. Her energy was waning.

"How about we go with the pink," he said. "I think it'll look great with the canopy. What do you say?"

She nodded vigorously, clearly glad she hadn't had to make the choice. He picked up the blanket and threw it in the cart. They still had a lot more things to buy, and if she was going to have a hard time with them, then, well, this shopping trip was going to take a long time indeed.

He pushed the cart along the aisle, Mia following behind him like a puppy, her eyes darting all around the store. He had been aware that taking in an older child would have its own unique challenges, but it was like there was a new problem popping up every day. He knew he was up for it, but still. It could be emotionally taxing.

And he didn't have a partner to share duties with. That would have made things easier. It would have made adopting Mia in the first place easier, too. He had been lucky getting her at all, but between his stellar reputation and references, high income, and flexible work hours, the agency had chosen him. Other single adoptive parents weren't usually so fortunate. In fact, they'd almost turned him down before even receiving his application, but he'd somehow convinced them to give him a chance.

And now he had Mia. It was just last month that she'd come home. He'd asked her what she liked when he met her at the adoption agency and she'd said princesses. So he'd put his full effort into

creating a princess-themed bedroom for her. When she'd first sighted it, a small smile crept across her face, but he could tell she was overwhelmed. He had no idea what her foster home had been like, but it couldn't have been good, based on what her caseworker had implied. And she'd been in the system for years, almost since she was an infant.

"Now we just have to pick out some clothes," he said. "We're going to have to get you a bathing suit if you want to use my pool. You ever go swimming?"

He looked down at her and she stared back up at him, nodding. "Don't know how to swim, though."

"That's okay." He smiled warmly. "I can teach you. I like swimming. I've gone swimming in the ocean. You like going to the beach?"

She smiled slightly. "Yeah."

"Good. This summer, we're going to go, then."

Instinctively, he reached down and stroked her hair, which was tightly braided. That had been yet another learning curve. As a white guy, he simply didn't know how to manage her hair. He eventually decided to take her to a salon, where they gave him a primer.

They reached the children's clothing department. Jack wondered for a moment if he should just ask her to pick anything. Children from a more stable background might have jumped at the chance of a shopping spree, but Mia had just shown that she might be overwhelmed. He'd have to guide her, but he didn't know what she liked to wear.

T-shirts were a safe place to start. "Do you like any of these designs, Mia?" he asked. "I think the one with the dog looks kinda cute."

She took a moment to consider the t-shirts. He wasn't sure what she was thinking at all, but she did reach out and touch a couple, running her hands over the designs reverently, as if they were valuable designer goods.

She turned to look back at him, characteristically silent again.

"Maybe this one with the flowers," he suggested, taking it down from the rack and handing it to her. She took it and looked over it, as if it were a piece of artwork and she was trying to discern the meaning.

After another moment of silence, Jack felt himself getting irritated again. But he couldn't let it show—he absolutely couldn't. He was normally a fairly patient person, and he had to harness that patience now, for her sake.

"Should we go with the dog and the flowers, then?" he asked

her, reaching down to take the shirt back.

She blinked at him, then shrugged. “Sure.”

He picked out shirts in her size and tossed them in the cart. He managed to get her to pick out a pair of pants and a dress, and then he decided these would be enough for now. Between this and the results of a prior shopping trip, she had a good starter wardrobe.

They passed by the swimsuits. “It’s about warm enough to go to the beach,” he said. “Maybe, since you like pink and purple, this one would be perfect for you.” He picked out a ruffled swimsuit that almost looked like a tutu.

She nodded and he placed it in the cart.

They made their way to the checkout line and he grabbed a chocolate bar without her noticing, as a surprise. She liked those, he knew, because he saw her eyeing them every time they were in line somewhere. But she was far too polite—or timid—to ask for one herself, unlike the bratty kids he sometimes saw who threatened to throw a tantrum if they didn’t get every little thing.

It could be a lot worse. Mia was a good kid.

After paying, he led her out to the car and they started on their way home. Jack put some music on and started singing along. When they approached a stoplight, he pulled the candy out from where he had hidden it. “I got this for you,” he said. “You were awesome during our outing today.”

Her face lit up and she took it from his outstretched hand. “Thank you,” she said before opening the wrapper ravenously. After taking a square of chocolate and savoring it, eyes closed with pleasure, she broke off another piece and held it out to him wordlessly.

“Thank you for sharing with me, Mia,” he said, accepting the piece. The chocolate melted a little on his hands as he bit it, and it tasted a little sweeter than he remembered chocolate tasting.

When they arrived at home, Mia skipped out of the car, clutching the rest of the chocolate bar, and Jack followed her with the bags. He opened the front door. “Let’s get this blanket on your bed and see how it looks,” he said. They walked up the stairs into her room.

Jack was pretty pleased with himself. He had always been a DIY kind of person and the canopy had turned out beautifully. The paint job on the chest of drawers was pretty cool too. And Mia did seem to like it, especially when he had presented it to her with a tiara, as if she were a real princess.

“It looks great,” he said. “Matches perfectly. What do you think?”

“Yeah!” she squealed, shaking out the blanket so it was spread

out on her bed. Jack plucked the candy bar off of the sheets, which were in danger of getting melted chocolate all over them.

Jack had never thought it would feel so damn good to make a child happy. It had only been about a month and he already loved Mia more than he thought imaginable. Just a month. It had been surprising, how much love he had inside him, that was just waiting to be given to someone. It hadn't been his parents, or a potential partner, so now it could be a child. *His* child.

"I'm going to start on lunch," he said. "Come down if you want to help!"

As he left Mia to pore over the new purchases—something he had glimpsed her doing after the last shopping trip—he felt a happy weight settle in his chest. Maybe this was going to work out after all.

It felt good to do all the things for her that his parents had never done for him. Before adopting her, he'd wondered if he'd feel resentful toward her for receiving the love he had never been given. But love was an infinite resource. He never did feel resentful. Instead, the positivity just multiplied every time he did something nice for her. It was like he was erasing the toxic legacy of his parents every day.

He couldn't help but remember Lucy, his old Sheltie. She was the one living being who had shown him unending amounts of love when his parents hadn't. The dog had been an angel sent down from Heaven to help a miserable young boy.

Jack had always considered getting another dog, anyway, as he couldn't imagine life without a dog in it. Maybe Mia would like having a pet, a companion. The house was kind of quiet with just the two of them. And maybe a dog would draw the little girl out of her shell a bit.

Now, there was an idea. He'd sleep on it, maybe turn it over more the next few days. But the more he thought about it now, the more he realized what a great idea it was.

Three – Tyson

Cleaning the dog runs wasn't the most glamorous job, but someone had to do it, even if that someone was the manager. Tyson dipped the sponge in the bucket again and wiped down the wall, getting an inexplicable amount of grime off of it. Tassel was such a small, slothful dog. How in the world did he manage to dirty his run so much?

The sharp scent of the soap hit Tyson's nostrils as he dipped the sponge again and finished up with the wall, mopping up the excess that had spilled to the bottom with a towel. There. Now Tassel would have a clean home, at least until he did whatever he did to make it dirty again. The little stinker.

He stood up and stretched. This job gave him a good workout. He did lift weights at home weekly, and go on runs, but he didn't even need to. He'd developed some nice muscles since signing on as a lowly junior volunteer, when he first enrolled at Redwood County Community College.

The degree in marketing hadn't been of much use, but the volunteer experience had, and now he was a manager. Not a day went by that Tyson wasn't proud of how far he'd come. He'd wanted to help animals since he was a kid, and even though he hadn't gone to school for anything animal-related, he'd found his dream job.

The degree hadn't been a *total* waste though, in retrospect. He'd used some of the skills and knowledge to help run the shelter and publicize adoption drives and other events. But if only he had discovered this gig earlier—he wouldn't have spent all that time as a wayward student.

Tyson left the room, glad he was finished cleaning out all the runs, and headed to the front of the shelter to see what he had to handle next. Tina caught up with him just as he turned the corner, her blonde ponytail bobbing.

"Someone's here to see a dog," she said. "You wanna take them?"

Tyson's tired expression broke into a grin. Matching people with their dogs and actually facilitating adoptions was the best part of this job. "I'm on it."

When he entered the lobby, he saw a white guy sitting down with a small brown-skinned girl. Well, that was interesting—he seemed like her parent, but they looked nothing alike. They both appeared pretty nervous though, eyes darting around the space.

"Hello there," he said. "I'm Tyson Haines, the manager here at the shelter. How can I help you today?"

The man stood up to shake his hand, the girl looking up at both of them curiously. “Jack Keppel, and this is Mia. We’re interested in adopting a dog.”

He was a big man, muscular and with a sporty look, like he spent time rock climbing or mountain biking or something. Maybe it was the athletic shoes or the tan or the stylish sunglasses hanging out of his pocket. The lean, corded muscles in his arms and legs certainly helped, and Tyson found his gaze lingering over them, envious, even though he knew he was pretty fit himself.

His face was lined slightly. Tyson estimated him to be in his early thirties, and he had a certain youthful vitality to him, barely quelled by his nervousness. His smile quirked in the corner endearingly, like it was kind of lopsided, and his blue eyes sparkled. But there was something shy about him, something restrained.

If Tyson had seen a photo of Jack, he would have guessed that he was very jovial, extroverted, and lively. But he was actually more subdued. It made him seem mysterious, despite the athletic exterior, giving the impression that he would be more comfortable in a suit.

But he was a good-looking guy, that was for sure. One of the most handsome Tyson had seen in a while. He was striking, really, and Tyson had to gather himself to prevent himself from acting foolish.

“Awesome, come on back.” Tyson led them down the corridor, slowing a little to fall in step with Jack. Mia followed like a shadow, clutching Jack’s hand. “So have you had a dog before?”

“I had a Sheltie as a kid,” said Jack. “Mia, you haven’t had a dog, have you?”

Mia shook her head quickly.

“So you have experience,” said Tyson. “Have you thought about what kind of dog you’d like? What kind of temperament, coat type, energy level, all that.”

“Uhh.” Jack scratched his head. “I work from home most of the time and have a big yard, so we can handle high energy. I don’t really have a preference. Just a dog who’ll be a good companion for Mia. That’s the goal here.”

Tyson noted with satisfaction that Jack had used “who” to refer to a dog. It was a small thing, but he liked when people referred to dogs like they were people. They really were.

“Are you open to adopting a puppy, or would you prefer an older dog who’s already housebroken?” asked Tyson.

Jack hesitated, and Tyson saw Mia squirming, almost like she had to go to the bathroom. Jack followed his line of sight and saw that the little girl was obviously dying to say something. “What do you think, Mia?”

"Puppy!" she cried, a grin breaking out over her previously solemn face.

Jack and Tyson shared a laugh, and Tyson noticed Jack squeezing the girl's hand affectionately. Maybe he was fostering her. It was uncommon, but certainly not unheard of.

"I'd be okay with a puppy," said Jack. "Like I said, I have time to help with the training and everything."

"I think I have just the dog for you, then," said Tyson, smiling.

Jack was going to love the Australian Shepherd mixes, especially since he had had a herding dog as a kid. They were so sweet and smart and playful, and one of them would make the perfect furry sibling for the girl. Because Jack hadn't brought a partner, Tyson wondered if he was single.

As they approached the room where the puppies sat in their playpen, Tyson felt a pang in his chest. Even though they hadn't been there that long, the puppies had wiggled their way into Tyson's heart, and he was going to have a hard time giving them up. It happened with all the dogs—Tyson even found himself imagining adopting them, having them at home—but the impulse had been strong with these two for some reason.

But it happened all the time. Tyson was always finding dogs at the shelter that he'd have liked to take home. If it were up to him, he'd have a whole 'nother shelter back at his place, with a whole pack of dogs to keep him company. It was always a tiny bit of heartbreak when someone else got them, but he knew it was for the best. He did a damn good job vetting candidates, after all.

He turned his attention back to his guests. The room had a glass window, and he saw the little girl, Mia, standing there with her nose pressed up against it. She was totally focused on the puppies, her fingers splayed out on the glass as she got as close as she could.

"We call them Smiley and Harold," said Tyson.

Jack laughed loudly—so loudly that he coughed. "Smiley and Harold?"

Tyson held up his hands. "I'm not the one who named them."

"It's cute," said Mia, so softly that Tyson almost didn't hear her.

When he turned to Jack, he saw the man's eyes widen. There was something going on there, Tyson could tell. He just didn't know what. While Jack obviously cared for the child, he hadn't been taking care of her for long, because he lacked a certain easy familiarity parents normally had with their children.

"Well, let's go in and meet them," said Tyson, pulling the door open. Mia darted in, immediately walking up to the playpen. When the puppies stumbled toward her, pressing against the fencing, Tyson's

heart melted.

Mia crouched down and stuck a finger through the fence to stroke the velvety head of the puppy who was closest to her. A smile was slowly spreading across her face, absorbed as she was in what could very well be her new best friend. She was rewarded when the puppy twisted his head around to lick her hand, and she drew it back with a squealing giggle of delight.

Tyson heard Jack chuckling behind him.

Four – Jack

Jack watched as Tyson picked up the puppies and put them down in front of Mia. They all sat on the floor in a circle around the little animals, and Mia squealed in delight when one of them crawled into her lap, trying to get closer to her face.

Jack had been a little worried that she'd be frightened, but she was taking it well. She seemed totally comfortable with the puppy, and was even gently pushing him away when he got too close. It was like she knew just how to handle him, even at the tender age of seven.

Jack was surprised and pleased.

"That guy is a little shyer usually," said Tyson. "But his favorite place to be is in someone's lap. He's one of the best cuddlers I've seen in my time here."

"Really?" asked Mia.

"Yup. You've got a bona fide teddy bear there," said Tyson.

Mia looked back down at the dog, who was nosing around her jacket, as if trying to find a cozy spot to settle down in her lap. He plopped into a jellybean shape, closing his eyes and sighing.

Something about this dog reminded Jack of Lucy. Maybe it was because they were both herding dogs, and had that silky, multicolored fur. Or maybe it was just watching a child bond with a dog. This puppy had blue merle fur just like Lucy had, but with tan patches on his face and around his chest and legs. Jack could only imagine how soft that fur was as he watched Mia pet the puppy.

"That one's Harold," said Tyson. "Of course, if you adopt him, you can change his name."

"I like the name Harold," said Mia, scratching behind the puppy's ears. The dog was blissed out on her lap, pudgy belly almost spilling over.

Jack looked at Tyson and made eye contact with him. What he didn't expect was the electrical current that seemed to pass between them. The shelter manager's deep brown skin was almost golden-hued in the filtered sunlight, and his pale green eyes were striking, like crystals.

Jack looked away quickly.

"Seems like you're getting along great with Harold," said Tyson, saving Jack from having to react.

"Yeah. It looks like Harold might just be our pup," agreed Jack.

"Well, the next step is to fill out an application," said Tyson. "If you're accepted, which I imagine you will be, we'll adopt Harold to you on a probationary period for one month. If all goes well, then he's

yours."

Jack's eyebrow rose. "It's that easy?"

"Yeah. The application is pretty comprehensive, though, I'll warn you. You'll need a couple of references."

"I think I can handle that," said Jack. He turned to Mia. "We have to go now, but we'll be back to see Harold again, okay?"

Mia looked back down, clearly reluctant to leave the puppy, but she allowed Tyson to put him back in the playpen. When she stood up, she took Jack's hand again, but her eyes were fixed on Harold, who was looking right back at her.

"Looks like a match has been made," said Tyson quietly, with a smile.

They went back to the main lobby, where Tyson handed Jack a clipboard with the application attached. Mia was wriggling next to him, barely able to keep still, as if she were imbued with the puppy's energy.

The questions weren't too difficult, but Jack was surprised by how his mind kept drifting back to images of Tyson. It was startling. His face was absolutely beautiful, and he had a lean body, muscles probably honed by all the work he did at the shelter. Jack was undeniably attracted to Tyson. But then, that wasn't unique. Jack *had* been attracted to other men.

Maybe Tyson was the first one who almost—just almost—made him imagine being in a relationship. People who were as kind as Tyson weren't easy to find. Jack admired how sweet he was to Mia and the animals, and the fact that he had chosen to work in an animal shelter spoke volumes.

He shook his head, trying to clear his mind, and focused on the application. It was comprehensive, asking about his lifestyle, house, experience, and all sorts of other stuff. But he answered all the questions honestly, knowing that there wasn't anything in there that would prevent him from getting a dog.

It was funny. He was adopting a child and a dog almost at the same time. Even though it was obvious, it hadn't even occurred to him until now that maybe the dog would help Mia adjust to her new situation: being adopted. It really was a good idea.

"I'm done," said Jack, handing the clipboard back to Tyson, who was finishing up something at the front desk computer. Jack couldn't help but watch the man, whose long fingers were flicking over the keyboard almost like a pianist's. Tyson could have been a male model in another life.

"Thanks," said Tyson, taking the clipboard. "We just have to verify this information and contact your references. We'll be in touch within the week, and Harold will be held for you, so no need to worry

about someone else getting him."

"Excellent, thanks," said Jack. When Tyson stood up, they shook hands, sending another shiver down Jack's spine. "We'll be waiting to hear from you!"

"Thank you," said Mia shyly.

"Of course, honey," said Tyson with a smile.

After saying goodbye, Jack and Mia headed out to the parking lot, Mia skipping ahead of him toward the car. It was refreshing to see her so exuberant, after her reticence of the past few weeks. It seemed like little by little, Jack was successfully coaxing her out of her shell. Getting the dog had been a stroke of genius.

But she was concerned on the ride home, fidgeting with the lace hem of her skirt. "Are we gonna get Harold?" she asked.

"We are," confirmed Jack. He couldn't think of any reason why they wouldn't—he had a high income, a large yard, and excellent references. He was the perfect prospective owner. "They just need to make sure that we're telling the truth on the application."

Mia seemed to ponder that for a moment, staring out the window at the forested road that rolled by. Her brows were furrowed. "Did you have to do the same when you adopted me?"

Jack's chest sparked with a burst of anxiety; it wasn't a difficult question to answer, because he was committed to telling her the truth, but he always became nervous when it came to discussing her adoption.

"I did," he said. "And it was harder and took longer. I had to show them I would take good care of you so they'd let us become a family."

"Hmm," she said, still staring out the window.

Jack felt a sheen of sweat form on his upper lip. He hoped he hadn't said anything to upset her. Perhaps she was just in a contemplative mood. At the age of seven, there was a lot she didn't understand about the world, but a lot that she did, and it was hard for him to know. Kids this age could be precocious, and given her tough background, he wouldn't be surprised if she knew a lot more than he thought she did.

They pulled into the driveway, and as Jack surveyed his home, he imagined what life would be like with Harold in it. He could only imagine Mia and Harold tumbling around, running in the backyard, cuddled on the couch, laughing and barking together. It was going to be a little messier, a little dirtier, a lot more lively.

It was going to be perfect.

"I have to do a little work right now," said Jack. "So maybe you can read or play games right now? When I'm done, we can cook together. Sound good?"

Mia nodded, then turned on her heel and rushed up the stairs to her room, taking long steps. Some of the life that had previously been bottled up inside her had been let out, and it was almost like she was a different child from the one he'd first met.

Now that Jack had some space to himself, he couldn't help but think of Tyson again. His thoughts just kept inexplicably drifting back in that direction. Well, it wasn't entirely inexplicable. After all, Jack was gay. It was just that he was in a state of limbo.

And he hadn't realized how numb he was until he met Tyson. Something about the attractive, dark-skinned man lit him up inside. He would even go so far as to call Tyson sexy, a word that he had shied away from for years. And why? People could be sexy—sexually attractive. There was nothing wrong with that. It was 2016, for crying out loud. Gay marriage was legal.

So why did Jack feel like he was living back in the 1950's? Despite the out gay men he saw everywhere he looked, he personally felt like he had to stay in the closet. Something was compelling him to do so. The easy answer, of course, was the ghost of his parents and his childhood in general.

Ray and Ann Keppel hadn't been accepting of gay people. First, it had been comments about "queers" when he was a child, quietly spoken so they thought he wouldn't hear. Then it became comments made in church, about how these newly out celebrities were sinning. And when he got to high school, the taunts of "faggot"—always directed at other boys, ones who just had the wrong interests or had too few male friends, never him—seared their impression on his heart.

Of course, he'd never told anyone he was gay. He'd briefly dated a girl in high school, then guys *and* girls in college, where he was free from his parents' sphere of influence. After moving to San Diego after graduating, he'd dated a couple more guys. But it never went far. His partners had called him frigid, restrained. Like he'd never fully accepted himself.

But he had. He was gay. He was sexually interested in men. And there was nothing wrong with that, he knew. But was it possible his parents' messages had pervaded his subconscious? Or was he just plain broken?

No, he couldn't think like that. If he wanted to remain single, that was fine. It was okay to be single. He told himself that nearly every day. He had other focuses, after all—doing software engineering for his company while doing consulting on the side, and now, caring for Mia. Between all that, he had plenty to occupy himself with, all of it worthy.

He shook his head and sat down in front of his computer. He wasn't broken or frigid. He wouldn't let the echoes of past

acquaintances affect him like that. He was Jack Keppel, a gay man, and that was perfectly okay.

Five – Tyson

It was safe to say that Tyson had a mild crush on Jack. Who wouldn't? The sporty guy with the winning smile would charm anyone of any gender, with his California good looks and earnest demeanor. He was sweet and sexy.

So it was with interest that Tyson reviewed his application, eager to soak up details about this man's life. The first interesting thing he found was that the only inhabitants of his house were him and Mia. No partner. Of course, he could have been dating someone who he didn't live with, but it didn't seem likely, especially because Mia was recently adopted.

That was what Tyson had decided, anyway. The easiest answer was that Mia was adopted. Of course, there were always exceptions, but then, the way she and Jack seemed more like acquaintances bolstered that theory. He'd screened a lot of pet parents, and he'd developed a kind of intuition for family dynamics along the way.

So, then, was Jack gay? It was certainly possible, but again, the easiest answer was that he was straight. Tyson knew that it was harder for gay guys to adopt, but then, if Jack didn't have a partner, the agency wouldn't know, would they?

The second interesting thing about Jack was that he had a high income. The job title and company name were vague, one of those corporate-sounding gigs where he probably made fancy spreadsheets for six figures. It was a little hard to stomach knowing that other people made that kind of money, when Tyson worked his butt off and then some for a nonprofit salary, but there was no point in dwelling on it.

All in all, Jack was the perfect candidate for a prospective pet owner. Another staff member had already checked in with Jack's references, who had agreed that he should be allowed to adopt, so now all that was left was for Tyson to let him know he could come get Harold.

Thinking about Mia and Harold becoming companions made Tyson smile, a warm bubble expanding in his chest. It was these moments that he lived for. He'd have to make sure he was there to facilitate the adoption, so he could vicariously partake in the family's joy as they took in their newest member.

Jack had said he preferred to be contacted by email, so Tyson took a moment to shoot off a message of congratulations, veering from the template the shelter normally used, since he had spoken with Jack personally.

When he was done, it was time to take the dogs out on their

afternoon walks. He started out with the room Leah was in, intending to work his way from the first dog down to her. They all started barking when he entered, rearing up and hitting the metal bars with a clanging sound, claws clicking on the floor. A more sensitive person might have been overwhelmed by the noise and energy, but by now, Tyson was used to it.

"All right, little dude," he said, clipping a leash around Sunny's collar. "Let's take a walk!"

The small, pug-like dog trotted out politely, tugging ever so slightly at the leash as he led Tyson down the line of runs. All of the other dogs barked in excitement as Sunny passed by, but he seemed unfazed.

The air outside was warm with a hint of summer, and Tyson took in a deep breath as Sunny kept trotting, appearing as dignified as he could be. He was one of the more mild-mannered dogs at the shelter, and Tyson knew he'd find a home soon, especially with that adorable scrunched up face of his.

"Hey," said Tina, waving her hand. Tommy, another Labrador mix, was standing patiently by her side, nose twitching in the direction of the dumpster.

"Hey," said Tyson, walking over to her. They fell in step, the dogs trotting amiably as if they too were friends.

"I've been meaning to ask you, how'd the meeting with that guy go? The one with the little girl?" she asked. "He got one of the puppies, right?"

Because of all the prospective pet parents he had met with this past week, it took Tyson a moment to realize she was talking about Jack, and as soon as he did, his face flushed. But what was there to be embarrassed about?

"Yeah, he's getting Harold," said Tyson, glad that his darker skin would conceal the fact that he was inexplicably blushing.

"Lucky." Tina shook her head, golden ponytail waving like a fish's tail. "They'll be the cutest family ever. Cute dog, cute puppy, cute guy…"

Tyson let out a laugh. "He was pretty cute," he admitted.

Tina smiled. "And you are too, you know. You could have anyone you wanted."

If it weren't for the gem sparkling on Tina's left hand, Tyson would have thought she was being flirty. Something about her cheerful demeanor and earnest comments came across as flirtatious, even though she was well aware he was gay. It was just her personality, he supposed.

"I'm just so busy with the shelter." He shrugged.

"Nonsense! You go home by six or seven every night, right?

Plenty of time for a date. And then there are your days off."

He laughed.

"Really, you have no excuse," she added.

"It's a pain in the butt to determine who's gay, though," he said. "I mean, I could go to a gay bar, but I want a relationship, not just one night."

"Yeah." Tina grimaced. "But you know, that guy, Jack… He gave off gay vibes."

"You think?"

She shrugged. "Yeah. I don't know how to describe it. But first, I was wondering why he was there with a daughter who looked nothing like him, and then I figured she might be adopted… And then it just sort of made sense, in my head, that he'd be gay."

"That was my train of thought too," Tyson admitted. "I mean, I don't presume to know what his life is like, but it makes sense."

"So there you go. You have to ask him out, then." Tina grinned.

"Have to?"

"You gotta. He's cute, you're cute, the kid is cute, the dog is cute, it's all perfect. You'll be the most beautiful family."

Tyson's blush returned. Tina was sweet. "Yeah… I mean, it is everything I want. The typical life with kids and a dog. What about you, by the way?"

"You mean kids? Do I want kids? I don't know… And neither does Dan," said Tina, suddenly contemplative. "I mean, there's a lot we want to do first, you know?"

"Yeah. But you're young, so it makes sense."

"Exactly. I figure we have a few years." Her grin returned.

They circled around to the back door and led the dogs inside, coming to a stop when they had to go in opposite directions.

"So you're gonna do it, right?" Tina asked.

"I'll think about it," said Tyson.

"I wanna hear all about it, then," said Tina. "Catch you later." She turned and left for the other set of runs, the Lab mix panting.

Tyson took a moment to give Sunny some snuggles, pressing his face against the funny little dog's soft fur and kissing him on the forehead, before returning him to his run. He wasn't totally present, though. Now that Tina had planted the seed in his head, he was consumed by the thought of asking Jack out.

Why not?

He couldn't think of a single legitimate reason why he shouldn't ask Jack out. Tina was right—his excuses were just that, excuses. Why should he avoid dating? He hadn't had sex in who knew how long, and he missed the companionship only another human

could bring. There was an easy solution to that—ask Jack out.

Suddenly, the thought of having someone else in his bed, a warm, solid presence, was immensely appealing. And if that presence was Jack… He shivered involuntarily as he led Sunny back to his run, perfunctorily going through the motions to initial his clipboard and close the latch, mind completely focused on what could be.

What could be? He could be the other daddy to that adorable little girl, for one thing. He'd never even thought he'd be able to have kids. When he was younger, it just seemed like something on the horizon that would happen eventually.

But now that he was older, at the age where many others were already having children of their own, it seemed like something impossible. He didn't have a partner, and he didn't have the money—adoption and surrogacy weren't cheap.

It had always been an impossible dream, one of those things that'd be nice to do. It'd be nice to spend a month in Paris. It'd be nice to have a bigger house with a backyard, where he could actually have dogs. But those kinds of things just didn't happen for people like Tyson, who was happy enough where he was, anyway.

And not only could he have kids, he'd have a partner, someone to share his life with. Someone to wake up to and someone to come home to at the end of the day, sharing meals and laughs and other little details of daily life.

He was getting ahead of himself, but a dream had to start somewhere. He'd never allowed himself to dream bigger, but maybe… this was just the beginning.

Six – Jack

Mia couldn't sit still in the seat, and Jack couldn't blame her. Today was the day Harold was coming home.

He'd received the email from Tyson just a couple of days ago and had shared the news with Mia, explaining that they had to buy supplies before they could pick up Harold. They'd made a big shopping trip to the pet store, and there, something magical had happened.

Mia had taken ownership of the process.

She was still hesitant to make decisions, but something about buying stuff for someone else made her more decisive than she had been before. She had picked out a purple collar and leash and a set of cute matching food and water bowls, allowing Jack to get everything else. She was still characteristically reluctant to speak, but he could see the enthusiasm almost ready to boil over, simmering just under the surface.

It was adorable.

When they'd gotten home, she'd quietly set up everything in its place, choosing to put the crate and dog bed in her own room, and the food and water bowls in the kitchen. She had been so reluctant to truly live in the space Jack had given her, even her own bedroom, but when it came to preparing for Harold's arrival, she behaved as if she had lived there for years.

And today was the day. They pulled into the shelter's parking lot, leash and collar in hand, the latter decorated with bone-shaped metal tags with a name and phone number. When they got out of the car, Mia skipped in circles around Jack. It was the first time Jack had seen her completely carefree, as if she had totally forgotten the tough transition of being adopted.

When they entered the lobby, they couldn't help but grin, almost conspiratorially. Jack felt like they were in this together, like they were accomplishing something together, and he knew she felt it too, by the way she proudly looked up at him, eyes shining.

Tyson appeared from a back corridor, a grin on his face. "Hey there, Mia, Jack. You ready to see Harold?"

"Yeah!" cried Mia. She was a little too loud—a first for her—but everyone in the lobby seemed to know what was happening, and surreptitious smiles broke out on everyone's faces. They couldn't begrudge Mia her joy.

Collar clutched tightly in her hand, Mia followed Tyson like an eager duckling, trying to peer around his legs for a glimpse of Harold. When they arrived at the room with the big glass window, Tyson

wasted no time in opening the door, immediately picking up Harold and placing him on the floor in front of Mia.

"Here he is!" he said, crouching down to help Mia fit the collar.

"He looks so happy to see you," said Jack, joining them on the ground. The puppy wagged his tail vigorously, tongue hanging out and eyes bright. He seemed to know that everyone was making a big fuss over him.

When his leash was clicked on, he tumbled into Mia's arms, and she picked him up, holding him over her shoulder like a baby. He tried to wiggle around to lick her face, and she giggled when he did.

"Is there anything else we need to do here?" Jack asked. He couldn't help flicking his eyes down to dog and child. He knew he was witnessing the start of something beautiful.

"I just need you to sign the final adoption contract," said Tyson.

"Right, okay. Mia, you ready to head back? Show Harold his new home?"

Clutching the puppy like he was a roly-poly teddy bear, the girl grinned.

"Remember to hold the other end of the leash in your hand," Jack said. "Make sure it doesn't drag."

She dutifully did as she was told and started walking after Tyson, who held the door open for her. Harold was squirming a little, but otherwise seemed content to be ensconced in her arms.

"You were right, he really is a cuddler," said Jack. He looked down to see Mia plant a kiss on the top of the puppy's head.

At the front desk, Tyson took a moment to print off a copy of the contract, and Jack read over it and signed.

"So the first month is probationary in the sense that you'll get a feel for if you and Harold are truly a good match. Please don't hesitate to call me with any questions or concerns," said Tyson as he took the clipboard back.

"Definitely. You got a card?" asked Jack.

Tyson slipped one out of his wallet and handed it over. Their fingertips touched under the small piece of paper, and Jack practically felt a lightning bolt run through him from the point of contact. His heart skipped a beat.

He looked up to see Tyson's wide grin, totally guileless and genuine. "Have a good one, guys," said Tyson.

"Will do." Jack smiled back, then looked down at Mia, who was sitting on the ground with Harold. He now looked sleepy. "You ready to head home?"

"Yeah," said Mia softly, still watching Harold

After they said goodbye, Mia led Harold out the door. The leash was slack between them as the puppy plodded behind her, tail wagging a little. The poor guy already seemed exhausted from all the excitement. When Mia noticed this, she hung back and picked him up again, holding him in her arms like he was a newborn.

Jack helped her up into the passenger seat, puppy and all, and they went on their way. “He’s asleep,” whispered Mia.

Indeed, Harold’s eyes were shut and his soft stomach was rising and falling. “It’s been a big day for him,” said Jack. “He’s coming to a new home.”

The puppy perked up again when they entered the house, as if the nap had completely rejuvenated him. He stepped inside quietly, peering around the space, nose twitching. Mia unclipped the leash and hung it near the door, like Jack had instructed.

“Let me show you where your food is,” she said, heading in the direction of the kitchen. The puppy immediately trotted after her.

Jack let out a sigh of relief. It looked like this was all going to be just fine.

The afternoon passed quietly, with Mia intensely focused on the well-being of her new friend. And the dog was happy for the attention—he rewarded Mia with as much loyalty as he could, struggling at the bottom of the stairs until she noticed and picked him up, and trying his best to understand the commands she was giving him, head tilted and ears lifting up. Jack had given her a couple of pointers on teaching him to sit and stay and figured she could experiment on her own; they could take obedience classes at the shelter after Harold was more settled in.

He had to explain why Harold couldn’t sit at the table at dinner. But as soon as she had eaten her mac ‘n’ cheese, Mia was back on the floor with him, playing tug of war, then flicking through a book while he dozed on her stomach. Even though she was still reticent when talking to Jack, she chattered away to Harold as if he was a peer. Jack had to quash a small pang of jealousy. She would get there with him, eventually. Harold was showing her the way.

Now, it was time for the puppy to sleep in his crate, which was at the foot of Mia’s bed. She had been adamant in wanting him to sleep in her room, and even though Jack was hesitant, the memories from his childhood pushed him to concede. How could he separate them at night, when they were glued together during the day?

“Okay, get in, little guy,” said Jack, gently pushing Harold into the nest of blankets. He was sleepy and tottering on his feet, and he curled up inside, blinking at them beseechingly.

“Goodnight, Harold,” said Mia. Jack showed her how to latch the crate, then she crawled into her own bed.

"Goodnight, Mia," said Jack, smiling.

"Goodnight." She smiled back.

That was a small triumph—she had never gone to bed so happy before. Jack was starting to finally feel like a father, little by little, even though it was slow going, and making his daughter happy was a good start. Jack flipped the lights as he left and returned to his own bedroom to prepare for bed himself.

But just as he had finished brushing his teeth, he heard the patter of feet in the hallway and a knock on the door. He would have thought Mia too timid to approach him like this, and his heart jolted—was something wrong with Harold?

He opened the door and she walked in, a determined expression on her face.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"He's crying," said Mia. "I don't want him to be sad, and I can't sleep." She rubbed her eyes.

Understanding dawned over Jack. Of course, he should have known. He'd never seen a puppy that didn't cry at night, and Harold was pretty young. Unfortunately, he had been a kid when Lucy was a puppy, and he didn't at all remember what they had done to prevent her from crying.

Oh, right. They'd put her in the garage—a cold, dark, musty room. It was only when Jack snuck out and comforted her that she finally stopped crying. Really, they comforted each other.

Harold and Mia deserved better.

"Let's keep him in the living room for now," said Jack. "Tomorrow, we'll call the shelter and ask them for some tips about how to make him feel better. Okay?"

Mia didn't seem happy about the idea of making Harold sleep outside of her room. She wrinkled her mouth. "All right," she said. "But we gotta call tomorrow."

"First thing tomorrow, I promise," said Jack.

He helped her move the crate and the puppy to a cozy spot in the living room; Mia seemed comforted when she saw that Harold was calmer now, and already starting to doze off. Jack tucked her in again, and when he went back to his room, he finished washing his face and slipped into bed.

He couldn't sleep immediately. The thought of calling the shelter in the morning and hearing Tyson's voice again—if Jack was lucky enough to catch him on the phone—was too much. It was invigorating in an unexpected way, making Jack's mind and body light up with possibilities. The newness of getting to know a new person, their heart, their body… Jack's heart pounded and his cock stirred. He was wide awake.

This had to just be infatuation, like he'd been struck by an arrow. That was how life worked, though, right? Crushes could happen at any time, toward anyone. You didn't have a lot of control over the whole thing.

And that was what this was becoming—a crush. Jack smiled wryly, thinking that he was too old to be having crushes. But if it was just that, he could safely ignore it. It'd pass, as soon as the probationary period was over and they didn't have to deal with the shelter anymore. He wouldn't need to see Tyson again.

That wasn't a comforting thought at all.

* * *

"Hi, this is Jack… I just adopted a puppy yesterday and I wanted to ask if you had any tips to stop him from crying at night?"

Jack was spread out on the sofa; he and Mia—and Harold—had just finished breakfast, and the two young ones were running around in the backyard. Harold could barely keep up with Mia on his stubby legs, so she kept doubling back and picking him up.

"Of course, I'll grab Tyson for you," said a female voice. There was a muffling sound. "Hey! Tyson!"

After a few moments, Jack heard someone new pick up the phone. His damn heart was thumping again, like a bass drum. It wasn't supposed to do that, not now, when he had more pressing things to attend to.

"Hey, Jack?" asked Tyson.

God, his voice was like… Clichés danced around Jack's head. Smooth velvet. Liquid gold. A tiger's purr. Something about hearing Tyson speak over the phone made it even sexier, like they were about to share some kind of secret.

"Hey, Tyson! How are you?" He almost slapped a palm to his forehead. He sounded like such an idiot, trying too hard to act casual. This was ridiculous. The more he fed his embarrassment over having a crush, the more difficult it became to disregard it.

But Tyson didn't seem to notice. "I'm good, thanks. How are things going with you guys? How's Harold?"

"He and Mia are best friends now. They don't spend a second apart," said Jack, glad to be able to give Tyson a positive report. "I'm just calling because he's crying at night in his crate."

"Ahh," said Tyson, understanding infusing his voice. "Common problem. To an extent, you just have to ignore it, but there are some things you can do. You can put an article of your clothing in the crate with him. I've also heard of some people having success with putting a ticking clock or a radio set to a low volume next to the crate. He might also need to pee, so you may need to monitor him for bathroom breaks."

"I see," said Jack. He tried to pay attention, but it was difficult. Tyson's beautiful voice was flowing out of the phone and right into his body. He could have been talking about the driest subject, and Jack still would have gladly listened. The man should have been a radio DJ. Or an audiobook narrator. More people needed to hear that incredible voice. And could he sing? He'd be just killer.

"Jack?"

"Oh yes, sorry, um, I was just keeping an eye on Mia and the puppy, you know. But yeah, that sounds great, I'll try it."

"They'll get over it quickly if you're consistent," said Tyson, mercifully ignoring how Jack had babbled. "That's the main thing—consistency. So just be patient and try different things."

"Awesome, thanks," said Jack. He had to get off the phone ASAP. As much as he enjoyed listening to Tyson, he also needed to stop making a fool of himself.

"Please feel free to call me if you have any more questions," said Tyson. "And we do have an obedience class, if you're interested. I teach it on Saturday mornings."

"That—that sounds great," said Jack. "I'll definitely think about it. Thanks, Tyson."

"Sure." Tyson hesitated, like he was trying to remember something else. "No problem."

"Bye!" said Jack.

Jack hung up the phone quickly. That hadn't been too bad. But man, he was not used to being attracted to someone. Tyson was one of the most attractive guys he'd met in recent memory, and Jack was at home so much that he didn't interact with very many people. He had no idea how to handle himself, and apparently, he turned into a complete idiot. If he wanted a chance with Tyson, he had to get a hold of himself, try to keep cool…

If he wanted a chance with Tyson? Where had that thought even come from? His mind was already working on getting with the shelter manager, and he hadn't even been aware of it. Is that really what he wanted—to date Tyson?

He shook his head. His love life was *not* what he wanted to think of now, when he had all these projects to complete. Work first had always been his motto, and it had gotten him far. He had a lovely child, a lovely house, a lovely dog.

There was just one puzzle piece missing, it seemed.

Later that night, he dug in the garage for an old clock radio. It didn't tick like an analog clock would, but it had some nature sounds, including a beach scene with crashing waves. Harold was already in Mia's room, surrounded by Mia's scent, and Jack could check in on him in the early morning to see if he needed to pee.

It was a good plan, and it seemed to work. Jack stayed up a little late to get work ready for Monday, and he didn't hear a thing from Mia's room, even when he pressed his ear to the door. He went to bed, satisfied, and woke up a few hours later, groggy but determined to make sure Harold—and by extension, Mia—were happy.

He gently pushed the door so as not to disturb the sleeping girl, and when he saw a furry lump next to her, sharing her pillow, his heart just about melted. That was why people had kids, he realized—for a never-ending series of heart-melting moments.

Harold and Mia were fast asleep, chests rising and falling slowly. The little dog's head was on the pillow, and Mia seemed to have pulled the blanket over his body too. He looked like a stuffed animal sleeping beside her, as fluffy as he was.

Jack closed the door quietly, smiling.

Seven – Tyson

The boardroom wasn't a welcoming place. You couldn't hear the dogs from here, and it smelled sterile and just a little bit musty, like a cubicle farm. The shelter generally didn't smell *great*—how could it, with all those animals—but it smelled familiar and comforting. The boardroom looked and felt like it had been plucked from a skyscraper in the city.

Tyson didn't like it. He plunked his butt down in the chair nervously, noting how cold the room was—did the air-conditioning work overtime in here?—and how it made his arms get goose bumps. He should have brought his sweatshirt, but he hadn't thought to. The physical exertion of working with the dogs usually kept him warm enough.

Tina took a seat next to him, a perpetual smile on her cheerful face. She nursed a plastic cup of iced coffee, silently tipping it toward him to offer him a sip, which he turned down. Caffeine would just make him more nervous.

A lady in a suit walked in last—Sandra. She stood at the head of the table, a thin smile on her face. She looked remarkably like a politician, with the pantsuit and the visible foundation and lip liner she wore. And while her eyes were bright, her mouth didn't match.

Shit. Was she going to deliver bad news?

Someone toward the back closed the door with a thud, which made Tyson jump. He wasn't usually like this. Something was definitely up.

"Glad to see you all here today," said Sandra, smiling that tight smile again. "I've received the report from my contact over at the government center, and I'll be sharing it with you so we can discuss our budget for this upcoming fiscal year."

Budget… fiscal year… Tyson didn't like this kind of talk. But he had to sit through it, because ultimately, it was all for the dogs—and the cats, and other animals in their care. Living beings who needed them to advocate on their behalf.

Sandra clicked some buttons on a remote and a slideshow appeared on the projector. Tyson scanned the numbers on the first page quickly, his brain racing to process them.

Fuck.

"As you can see, we've received far less than expected," said Sandra. "In fact, they've cut into our operating budget as well. We are going to have to make some changes by putting our contingency plans in action."

Tyson's heart thumped, and sweat beaded on his upper lip.

Contingency plans? Those were never supposed to happen. Ever. They'd always been able to count on the county for their operating expenses, at least. That was the bare minimum they needed to keep everything running.

"Wait, wait, wait," said one of the other managers, an indignant older woman named Shelby. "Why in the world did they cut into our operating budget? They've never done that before!"

Shelby pursed her lips, irritated. She reflected the uncomfortable tone of the room. As Tyson looked around, he saw discomfort written on everyone's faces. The board was unhappy at having to deliver this news, but they didn't have the visceral disappointment of the shelter workers. Everyone knew what contingency plans meant, but the shelter staff would take the biggest hit emotionally and financially.

"Tax revenue has been lower this year, and some funding was taken to fuel other initiatives," said Sandra. "That's all they gave me to work with."

Silence floated across the room like mist, but Tyson knew everyone was boiling under the surface. He turned to Tina, who wasn't smiling, for once. She idly stirred the ice in her now-empty coffee cup. It was the only sound in the room.

Sandra chose this moment to plow forward, which was probably for the best—everyone just wanted this horrible meeting to be over as soon as possible.

"So. Contingency plans. The board and I discussed this earlier today and we're going to have to transfer some dogs and cats, reduce the volunteer program, and lay off some of the newest hires. The final report will be emailed to everyone after this meeting, so you all have a copy."

People grumbled to each other, but no one had anything much to say, it seemed. Tyson, like many others, was just stewing in his own head. He knew his own job was safe—as an experienced manager, he was essential to the shelter—but he felt for the people who would lose their jobs. And transferring the animals… That was the kicker.

There was only one shelter in Redwood County, and the staff worked damn hard to make sure every animal got placed in a home—not euthanized. But other shelters weren't necessarily like that. The other shelter in the contingency plan was run by animal control, so it took in every animal. And in order to be able to do that, they had to euthanize perfectly healthy animals to make room for new arrivals. Disabled, elderly, and sick animals didn't stand a chance.

Tyson felt sick. He imagined Leah, with her cataracts and advanced age, Bobsey, a Shih Tzu mix with three legs, and Zorro, a deaf cat. If they went to the other shelter, no one would adopt them.

They could very well end up in a trash bag in a dumpster, ending their days unloved.

A tear prickled Tyson's eye and he blinked quickly to hold it back. No. This could not happen, would not happen. He couldn't just accept this decision. There had to be something they could do about it.

"I'd like the managers to stick around to discuss this further," said Sandra, practically squirming in her pantsuit. Tyson didn't dislike Sandra; he knew she was on the board because she was as passionate as he was about the animals. But it was hard to avoid making her the focus of his anger, for now.

"See ya," said Tina, as she got up and left, a sympathetic but unhappy twist in her mouth. The ice in her coffee cup clattered as she tossed it into a trash can on her way out.

"Isn't there anything we can do about this?" asked Shelby, still irate. "Can we cover the shortfall privately, or make an appeal? We don't have to just take this lying down. We have options, you know, before we institute the damned contingency plan."

"I know no one wants to transfer the animals to animal control. I know they kill animals at that shelter," said Sandra flatly, finally addressing the elephant in the room. "And we do not want to lay off our newest employees and part-timers. If we want to avoid this, then we do need to consider our options."

Another silence pervaded the room. Money didn't grow on trees, after all, and they couldn't just run a bake sale or carwash. A shortfall this big required support from a corporation, the federal or state government, or a charitable foundation.

"We don't need to do anything just yet. There's still time before the end of the fiscal year, and we have enough to go off of until then. Let's think about this and return once our emotions have cooled off. Okay?" Sandra held her hands out, as if she was imploring everyone to stop directing their anger at her. Tyson felt a pang of sympathy. It couldn't have been easy to deliver this news.

"Okay," grumbled a few people.

"Great, we'll set a time for another meeting," said Sandra. "We have time and we can fight. Let's do this."

People started to file out, but Tyson didn't want to get up yet. The room seemed even colder than it had before the meeting, and he still couldn't escape the pain that had flooded his heart at the thought of his beloved dogs—his friends—being sent to a certain death, surrounded by people and places unfamiliar to them.

Finally, he felt like he *could* move. He walked back to the main part of the shelter, surrounded by the sounds of dogs barking once again. Here, he felt like he could think clearly. But first, he had to get

another round of walks done.

He made a beeline for Leah's cage, needing to spend time with her. He was shaken after imagining the horror of her being shipped off to animal control. He crouched down, and she licked his face, her silky fur brushing his cheeks and her warm body feeling like a real live teddy bear.

Tyson clipped the leash to her collar and led her out to the dog park. It was amazing how she became like a younger dog around him. She was so exuberant, like she forgot she had cataracts and a slight case of arthritis. The sun made her golden fur glow and shine with health.

He took a moment to find a tennis ball in the grass and tossed it beyond her, watching her skillfully run after it, easily catching it in her mouth. She fumbled the next two catches, but she still did great for a dog who couldn't see well. The pit in Tyson's heart became deeper. If people saw what a great dog she was, they would adopt her, wouldn't they? She was perfect.

Leah tired quickly, so Tyson took her on a walk around the shelter, allowing her to stop and smell various seemingly random areas. Songbirds chirped and squeaked in the forest surrounding the shelter, and for a moment, Tyson was able to just spend this time with Leah, forgetting about the problems he'd have to return to in the shelter. She trotted over to a large stick on the ground and picked it up, carrying it with her proudly until they arrived at the back door again.

Tyson was reluctant to put her back in her run; he wanted to keep her by his side for the rest of the day, but of course, other dogs needed their turns as well. Thoroughly exhausted from her exercise, she slipped in easily and curled up in her dog bed, after taking a long drink of water. Tyson initialed her sheet, taking a moment to look over the comments others had made. It was unanimous: Leah was an angel.

And angels couldn't be sent to hell—because that was what the kill shelter was. Tyson knew the animal control officers worked hard at their jobs, but the shelter itself was more like a clearinghouse, a temporary place where animals were held before being euthanized or passed on to somewhere else. They didn't get a lot of socialization there, if at all, and few people went there to adopt, preferring private agencies or county shelters like this one.

As Tyson clipped the leash on little Bobsey's collar, patiently walking behind the three-legged dog to let him set his own pace, the resolve in his heart grew stronger. He'd find a solution to the budget shortfall no matter what. There was no other choice.

Eight – Jack

Jack's hand stroked Tyson's side, running his fingers down the man's muscular back as he writhed beneath him, pinned down and at his mercy. It was fun to tease him, slipping a finger tantalizingly close to his cock, stroking his fingers over it lightly, only to see it bob to life, given false hope, dripping precome from the tip.

And when he turned the man over, he drank in his broad chest with its smattering of black hair, soft under Jack's palm. He pinched one of the dark brown nipples, delighting in the reaction it elicited; Tyson gasped, his eyes closed tightly, overwhelmed by the amount of pleasure Jack was giving him.

Jack was hard and ready to go. From the instant he had seen Tyson naked he had been fully erect, and he took his cock in his hand, squeezing it, noting that it simply couldn't get any harder. It was remarkable. No one else in his life had ever had this effect on him.

The lighting in the room was dim, making the already brown-skinned Tyson a little darker. All of the gradients of his muscles were starkly contrasted in the flickering candlelight, and Jack could have just looked at him forever, but he had to do something, take action, make use of this magnificent opportunity…

He slipped his hand down to Tyson's backside and found his entrance. When he inserted a finger, the other man obliged, spreading his legs wider and giving him better access, and when he tried two fingers, he discovered that he could really drive Tyson wild by going deeper, even deeper.

That meant he was ready for Jack's cock. He grabbed the bottle of lube from the bedside table and squirted the cold liquid onto his hand, warming it up as he rubbed it up and down his cock. Then he got into position again. He was already sweating, anticipating the immense pleasure that would flood through him when he entered Tyson. And he could see the other man's breaths, shallow in his chest, and knew that they both wanted this more than anything.

Jack lowered himself over his partner, pushing his cock inside slowly, millimeter by millimeter, at a pace that was tantalizing and exceedingly gentle. When he had gotten as far as seemed comfortable for Tyson, judging by the man's clenched shut eyes and balled up fists, he stopped, allowing them both to revel in the feeling of filling and being filled.

"God, you feel so good," said Tyson with his velvet voice, eyes still closed tightly. Jack could feel the tension slowly leaving him as his muscles relaxed, and then he tried pushing in a little more, wondering if he could bury himself to the base. He wanted nothing

more right now that this primal union with Tyson, with the man who had captured his heart and imagination and libido like none other…

He could hear a dog barking from outside and tried to ignore it, instead focusing on Tyson's gasps of pleasure as he moved inside him, but it became more and more difficult. Light filtered in through the windows, almost like it was daytime…

Jack opened his eyes with a start, realizing that he was damp; he was covered in sweat and the weight of his comforter almost felt oppressive. He threw it off, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

He had been having a sex dream… about Tyson.

He fell back onto his pillow and groaned. Of course. He could hear Harold barking loudly from Mia's room, as well as some pop music blaring from the clock radio, muffled through the wall. The kids were up, and now Jack had to get up and make them some breakfast.

But holy shit… a sex dream about Tyson? This crush was getting more and more intense by the day. And it was perfectly innocent, wasn't it? So why did Jack feel like he was doing something wrong, like he had to quash these feelings and pretend that they didn't exist?

He looked down, annoyed, to see that he was semi-hard and getting harder. He'd have to take care of himself in the shower if he wanted to get anything done today. But if he did that, he would inevitably fantasize about Tyson again. And feeding the fire just didn't seem like the right thing to do.

But *why*? The legacy of the Keppel family had apparently pervaded his psyche to the point where he couldn't fully accept himself. It was perfectly healthy and normal to fantasize about an attractive man. Goodness knows his straight friends back in high school and college had talked about hot women all the time, and all their detailed fantasies… They were shameless, so why couldn't Jack be the same?

It was so difficult, so infuriating, when what he knew to be fact and what he felt weren't aligned. Jack knew that it was okay to be gay and it was okay to have these thoughts. But deep inside himself, a part of him, perhaps his inner child, was scared. Scared of how his vehemently anti-gay parents would react, when they found out the truth. He'd felt the need to quash his feelings and hide any sign of gayness, lest they punish him for it.

And it had worked. He'd escaped his school years unscathed, practically living a double life. But he was still living under their yoke, apparently, if he couldn't live his adult life on his own terms.

Was he going to have to go to therapy or something? There was an endless supply of LGBT-friendly therapists here in Redwood

County. But even the thought of acknowledging that he needed an LGBT therapist, specifically, was beyond him. Now, in his early thirties, he'd accepted himself to the point where he didn't go chasing after women, or carry on the delusion that he'd find one attractive, one day, but he didn't want to pursue men, either. He was in limbo, in a kind of self-inflicted purgatory.

When was he going to get out? When was he going to find a nice guy to be a second daddy for Mia? Sure, she'd be fine, raised by a wealthy single parent. But what about him, and his needs?

He groaned. This wasn't the first time he'd thought about this. His strong attraction to Tyson had just been the catalyst for this round of self-questioning. It happened like clockwork, it seemed, once every other month. He'd curse himself and his parents and nothing would change.

As he turned the knob, the hot water started spraying out, and he stepped in, grateful. Taking a shower felt like washing away his guilt and his blocks. It all returned when he stepped out and toweled off, but right here, he felt like he could be himself. Maybe it was because it was where he jacked off as a teenager, where he felt like he had a truly private place to indulge in his sexuality. He hadn't brought any guys into the shower, but he'd let his imagination run amok.

And it was doing that right now. The half-baked dream of Tyson returned, spurred on by Jack's now revved up libido, and he stroked himself furiously, as if he wanted to purge himself of his attraction.

He knew very well that masturbating to the thought of someone was only a great way to lust after them further, but right now, he didn't even care. He just needed this release, the orgasm he had been denied by being woken up from the dream too early. As he came, he felt his body go stiff, then deflate, and he panted heavily as he stood there, letting the aftershocks course through him.

Jack did feel better when he got dressed and left, checking in on Mia and Harold. Mia had already started a shower by herself and was now getting dressed, Harold swarming around her feet as she pranced about the room in a dress. Jack had initially been surprised by how self-sufficient she was, but it wasn't too surprising, really, when he considered her background. If you had parents who didn't take care of you, then you'd have to care for yourself.

He pushed the door open a little, and Harold darted out through the gap, barking happily. Mia stepped out a moment later. "You ready for breakfast?" he asked.

She smiled shyly and nodded. She was still nonverbal sometimes, but she seemed a little more accepting of Jack caring for her, and she just seemed happier overall—there was no other way to

explain it. Jack was quickly learning how to read her moods, which had significantly improved since her first week at his home.

"I was thinking of making pancakes," he said, as they went down to the kitchen, Harold gingerly taking each step as if he was scaling a mountain. They waited at the bottom of the stairs, and when Harold made it down, Jack cheered. "Good job, Harold! Good dog!"

Mia joined in with her giggles, and the puppy looked pleased with his accomplishment. He trotted after them as they went into the kitchen, Mia hanging back to walk beside him.

"Has he learned to sit and stay yet?" asked Jack.

Mia shook her head and glanced at Harold, whose ears perked up, as if he knew he was being discussed.

"Maybe I can help you with a training session," said Jack. "And we can sign up to take him for classes at the shelter. What do you think?"

Mia tilted her head, considering. "Like school?"

"Kinda," said Jack. "Or maybe summer camp. It'll be fun."

"Okay," said Mia. "He's gotta learn."

"That's right," said Jack. "He needs to know his manners so he can be a good dog."

As he started mixing pancake batter, Jack made a mental note to call the shelter and sign up for the classes. That was when he remembered that Tyson was the one who led the classes; at least, that was what he had mentioned.

Well, he'd just told Mia it was going to happen, and he couldn't back out of it now. But why back out? Jack couldn't run away from his problem, if he could even call it that, of being attracted to Tyson.

Why not just tackle it head on?

Nine – Tyson

The obedience lessons were one of the things that were going to be reduced under the contingency plan. They weren't strictly necessary, after all. As he set up some chairs and got out a jar of treats, Tyson realized that this might be one of the last obedience classes he taught at the shelter.

He sighed. The aura of anger about the budget cuts was still pervading the shelter. He still loved working with the dogs, but it was becoming increasingly unpleasant to be at the shelter, knowing there was a sword hanging over all of their heads. The two staff members who were to be laid off had already been warned and were looking for other positions. Raphael and Nina had been great employees, and Nina had mentioned having to move back in with her parents while she looked for another job.

Everyone was feeling doom and gloom about the whole thing, even though the board members and managers had been working on finding other sources of funding. Many of the board members were on the board *because* they had useful connections, but when it came to these larger sources of funding, it could take a while before they found anything useful.

It was a waiting game.

As the first students walked into the classroom, Tyson put those negative thoughts away. Here was an hour in which he'd get to do something really fun and relaxing, and he didn't want to spoil it with all his worries.

He greeted the students—both dog and human—and offered the humans some treats to use during the class session. This was an introductory level class, in which dogs would learn the basics, like sit and stay. It wasn't as fun as the classes where they learned tricks, but it was rewarding—a well-behaved dog was a more secure dog. Anything to keep a dog in its forever home was a good thing.

Some of the students were foster owners, who used this class as an opportunity to help make a dog more adoptable, while others were fresh faces who'd just taken home their new pet. Tyson surveyed the students, acknowledging the foster owners who he knew and welcoming the new students.

His heart skipped a beat when a little girl with an Australian Shepherd mix pranced into the classroom. If Mia and Harold were here, then that meant…

Jack strode in uncertainly, looking around and scoping out the classroom. Tyson immediately focused on him, dazzled by his beautiful face and tight muscles. God, could a man look any more

perfect? Tyson grinned and waved slightly. But instead of looking more at ease, Jack looked more nervous. He didn't make much eye contact, but he did approach Tyson.

"It's good to see you guys here. Hey, Mia. How's Harold?" asked Tyson.

"We're best friends!" The girl grinned and picked up the dog, who was squirming and trying to lick her face.

"I can see that. It looks like he really likes you." Tyson smiled and looked back up at Jack. "Everything been going good?"

"Yeah, yeah. He's fit in amazingly well," said Jack. "I lost a pair of leather shoes to him, but what are you gonna do?"

Tyson laughed. "It happens. There's always one pair of shoes that gets sacrificed."

He saw Tina, his assistant for today, walking in. "Class will start in just a couple moments, so get comfortable, okay?" Tyson smiled at Jack and Mia and went to talk to his coworker.

She waggled her eyebrows at him when he approached. "Look who's here."

Tyson scowled, but he wasn't upset. He was actually delighted that Jack had shown up. Normally, he paid more attention to who signed up for his classes, but given recent events, he hadn't looked.

"You've gotta make a move," said Tina. "It's like the universe delivered him right to you again."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. We'll see," said Tyson noncommittally. He actually loved the idea of asking Jack out. It just sucked when you didn't know if a guy was into other guys or not. Asking straight guys out by accident wasn't fun… especially when they were drunk and got offended and punched you.

But Jack wasn't like that. He had a puppy and a small child, so he was obviously a kind soul. In any case, Tyson couldn't think about it right now. He had a class to teach.

"Hello everyone," he said, striding up to the front of the room, Tina following behind him. "I'm glad you're here today for Introductory Obedience! I'm Tyson, and this is Tina. We're going to be teaching you and your pups sit and stay today. If we have some extra time, we can go over an extra trick, too. But sit and stay are a couple of the most important commands."

Tina had brought one of the shelter dogs, Amelia, to demonstrate techniques. The eager to please poodle mix looked up at her, awaiting her command.

"So," said Tyson, "let's jump right in with sit. There are many different ways to teach this basic command. I'm going to go ahead and demonstrate the first one with Amelia, here."

He took out a treat and held it up for Amelia, crouching down

to her level and bringing it up over her head. When her butt touched the floor, he praised her. “Good sit, Amelia! Good sit! Sit.”

“The main idea is to get them to associate the word with what they’re doing. So you don’t want to tell them to sit when they’re not doing it—not at the beginning, anyway, because they won’t understand,” said Tina.

“Now, go ahead and try it with your dogs. Tina and I will come around and help you out,” said Tyson.

The pet owners immediately turned to their dogs and held out the treats. There was a chorus of “sit!” around the room, and Tyson watched everyone’s progress. Tina had already gone to help one of the fosters, but when she caught Tyson’s eyes, she tilted her head toward Jack and Mia.

They were doing well, but Harold was just so small that he was easily confused and overwhelmed by the other dogs. “Sit!” said Mia, holding the treat over his head like Tina had demonstrated.

Tyson walked toward them. “You’ve got a great voice, Mia,” he said. “You sound so commanding.”

She smiled up at him. “Harold’s not getting it, though.”

“That’s okay,” said Tyson. “He’s little, so it’s going to take him a while to learn. How long did it take you to learn how to add numbers?”

She tilted her head. “A long time.”

Tyson nodded. “So you gotta be patient with Harold too. He needs practice. Practice makes perfect.”

Tyson stood up as Mia continued trying to get Harold to sit, and he looked at Jack for his reaction. The doting expression on his face told all—Jack seemed more like a father than the first time Tyson had seen him.

“His butt’s going down!” yelled Mia. “Sit! Good sit!” She handed Harold the treat and kissed him on the top of his head.

“Good job, Harold!”

Tyson and Jack had spoken simultaneously. They looked at each other, eyes meeting awkwardly. But there was something else in Jack’s eyes—was it desire? He was clearly restraining some major part of himself; it was the thought Tyson had when he first met the guy.

“He’s a good dog,” said Tyson, breaking the awkwardness and turning back to Mia. “He’s part Australian Shepherd, and they’re really smart.”

“Really?” asked Mia.

“Mmhm. They were bred to herd sheep, so they’re really good at following directions and learning new things.”

“Wow.” Mia looked down at Harold, squinting. It looked like she was having a hard time imagining her dog herding sheep.

“All right, everyone. I think it’s time for a quick break, and then we’ll work on teaching the dogs to stay,” said Tina from the front of the classroom. She winked when she caught Tyson’s eye, and he felt a flush rise on his cheeks.

He turned back to Mia and Jack. “You guys are gonna do great,” he said, walking away. It was about time he paid attention to the other students. He would have to find another, more appropriate time to ask Jack out.

He walked back to the front of the room to stand next to Tina. She had handed out bowls of water and the dogs were getting refreshed. There were also vending machines for the humans, a couple of whom were cooling off with sodas.

“So, did you ask him out?” she asked, a little too loudly for Tyson’s comfort.

“Shh. I didn’t. I’ll talk to him again after class,” said Tyson.

“Don’t let this opportunity slip.” She laughed.

Tyson turned back to watch Jack. He had crouched down next to Mia, and had placed a hand on her shoulder. It looked like they were more comfortable with each other than they had been when Tyson first met them. Mia was laughing at something Harold was doing, and Jack had a grin on his face. The way he was looking at her was precious, like he truly saw what a treasure he had been entrusted with.

The fatherliness in Jack’s expression tugged at something deep inside Tyson. He wasn’t just missing out on a partner, he was missing out on his family. Sure, he still had his parents, and siblings, but they weren’t the people he could come home to, not anymore.

He had to stop wishing and start doing. Tina was right. He had to ask Jack out, sooner or later.

Ten – Jack

That had been an excellent class. Tyson and Tina were clearly experienced and knew their shit, and Mia was thrilled that Harold had already started making progress toward learning sit and stay. Best of all, she had done most of it herself, with a little guidance from Tyson. For a seven year old, she was very clever.

Pride flooded Jack's heart. So this was what it was like to feel proud of a child's accomplishments. And given Mia's age, she had a lot more accomplishments to come in her future. It made him love her just a little bit more than he already did—and that was a lot already.

Before leaving, he wanted to thank Tyson for his help. And truth be told, he just wanted to interact with Tyson again before leaving. He walked up to the front, where Tyson was chatting with his colleague, and waited patiently.

"Hey," said Tyson, when he turned away from Tina, who slipped away. "You guys did great today."

"Yeah, thanks," said Jack. "You were great teachers."

"Shucks." Tyson grinned.

"Seriously. This shelter is such an amazing resource. I had no idea it did all this until we adopted Harold. It's a real asset to the community," Jack said. He meant it. He had no idea animal shelters were like this. The place they'd gotten Lucy had seemed a little dingy, from what he remembered.

"You're very kind," said Tyson. He sighed. "It is an amazing resource. We need to get the community to see that."

Jack would be the first to say he was oblivious to other peoples' moods, but there was definitely something up with Tyson, something under the happy, smiling dog trainer surface. He had made an odd comment—didn't the community already see how awesome the shelter was?

"What do you mean by that?" asked Jack.

Tyson sighed again. Yeah, something was definitely up.

"We just got the budget report back from the county and it says we're getting our funding cut," started Tyson. "And it's going to be pretty bad. They took out some out of our operational budget, so we may have to lay off a couple people, transfer some of the dogs and cats to animal control…"

Jack sucked in his breath. The shelter had seemed untouchable, with how clean, efficient, and well-managed it was. If they had to lay people off and transfer animals, then the cuts had to have been bad.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," said Jack. "That's horrible news."

“Yeah. Don’t repeat this, by the way,” said Tyson.

“Of course not.”

Inwardly, Jack was pleased that Tyson had chosen to confide in him. He was surprised when Tyson had mentioned that he should keep it quiet. After all, Jack was just another new pet parent, as far as Tyson was concerned, not anyone worthy of shelter management secrets.

But of course, his delight was tempered by the awful news. People would be losing their jobs, and he didn’t like to think what would happen to the animals who had to be transferred. And he imagined that the shelter wouldn’t be able to do as much programming as it did, like these obedience classes.

“It’s just hard. I mean, we work with the little we get already to do the best we can for these animals, and then you have someone coming in and slashing your funding… It makes you feel helpless.” Tyson shook his head, looking deeply disturbed. Jack guessed that he knew more details about what the budget cuts entailed.

It was difficult to watch such a beautiful man be in such pain. Jack felt compelled to do something about it, and if he was a friend or family member, he would have been able to say something, do something. But they were barely acquaintances. There wasn’t much you could do for an acquaintance that wouldn’t come across as weird.

“Well, it’s clear that you care. Anyone can see that,” said Jack, hoping he was choosing his words right. “Is there anything I can do?”

Now that—he had no idea where that came from. What in the world could he possibly do to help Tyson?

“We’re actually going to have a town hall meeting, or at least, we’re trying to organize one. You’re on the shelter’s email list, right? You’ll get an email if and when it happens,” said Tyson, looking a little brighter.

Jack couldn’t help but look into those earnest eyes, which were a pale green in color, striking against his brown skin. Tyson seemed to be cheered by the fact that Jack was interested in helping.

“Okay, I’d love to know about that,” said Jack. “I’ll show up. We’ll bring Harold.”

This made Tyson laugh. “I’m sure he’d have a lot to say. Here, have another treat on me.”

Tyson dug into the bag of treats and handed one to Jack. As he took it, their fingertips brushed. Jack felt an involuntary shiver go up his spine. Tyson’s fingers were cool and dry, covered with the crumbles from the treat bag.

“Thanks,” said Jack, smiling. “I guess I should go see what my little monsters are up to.”

“Of course.” Tyson smiled back.

Before he could say anything else stupid, Jack turned to see to Mia and Harold, who were sitting on the floor, playing. Mia was continuing to teach Harold sit and stay, though it seemed like the puppy was too tired for her to get anywhere right now.

He held out his hand to Mia and she took the treat. “Sit! Sit, Harold!” she said, holding the treat above. His furry little butt touched the floor, and as soon as it did, she squealed with delight. “He’s getting it!”

“Yeah, he really is! He’s a smart guy. Almost as smart as you.” Jack put his arm around her on impulse and squeezed her into a hug.

She stiffened a bit, and he got a burst of nerves. Had he overstepped her boundaries? They weren’t very physically affectionate yet… But she looked up at him with a tentative smile, and he knew that it’d be okay between them. They just had a ways to go before she was fully comfortable.

Eleven – Tyson

"Shake. Come on, honey, shake."

Tyson held out a treat to Leah, who looked at him intently with her brown-gray eyes. She tilted her head like she was a puppy again, tongue hanging out eagerly. She just wasn't getting it.

"Shake, Leah. *Shake*. Good shake." Tyson took her paw and shook it, handing her the treat while he did so.

Sometimes, when he had time, he liked to take some of the less adoptable dogs—even though it broke his heart to consider them that—and teach them tricks. They'd been in the shelter so long that he figured they'd get bored sometimes, and training was always a good way to combat that.

He'd just recently started teaching Leah how to shake paws with him, so he didn't expect her to get it immediately. She was older, after all, though she still showed an interest in learning. And he knew she'd get it eventually. It didn't make any sense to Tyson that old dogs *couldn't* learn new tricks. Of course they could.

After doing a couple more rounds with her, he crouched down to her level again and took her into a hug, burying his face in her silky fur. She pressed herself into the crook of his neck, the humidity of her breath hitting his skin. When she sensed that he was carrying some pain, she licked him gently, and he drew back.

When he looked into those beautiful eyes, he was compelled to protect her. Even if he had to move out of his condo, where he couldn't have a dog, and move in somewhere else, or personally go around begging people to adopt her, he'd find her a home. Because the alternative was too horrible to think about.

Because of how long she'd been at the shelter, and her age and health issues, she was almost certainly going to be on the list to be transferred to the other shelter, where she would quickly be euthanized. It was a certainty. If she was younger, she'd have a chance—they were good, over there, about finding homes for easily adoptable dogs. But no one had wanted her so far.

No one except Tyson.

Not for the first time, he cursed the condo management. He'd moved in thinking he could get a dog. Two months later, just as he'd gotten settled in, they'd decided to revise everyone's leases by adding a 'no pets' clause.

It hadn't been received well, of course. People who currently had pets were given a grace period to move out, while those, like Tyson, who were planning to get one, were just shit out of luck. He and some of his neighbors had put some effort into seeing if they had

legal recourse, but it had turned out to be easier for many of them to move, so the initiative fell apart.

And of course, Tyson was stuck in an 18-month lease. He'd been looking at other places, but the list of homes he could afford was small. Despite being farther out from the city, Redwood County real estate prices was inflated thanks to the enclaves of wealthy folks who kept summer homes here. The condo was the best Tyson could do for now.

He sighed and stood up after attaching Leah's leash, reluctant to put her back in her run. If only he could adopt her or convince someone else to. Maybe they could hold an adoption drive before the end of the fiscal year, to give the contingency plan dogs and cats one last chance. That was an idea, at least.

Tyson took out his phone again upon hearing the chime that indicated a new email. He got plenty of junk and various newsletters, but he was waiting for a very important announcement, so every notification had made his heart skip a beat. Sandra had mentioned that she was working hard on getting a town hall meeting set up, so that people who supported the shelter could make an appeal, explaining that they wanted their tax money to go to helping the animals.

They didn't yet know if she'd be successful, but she was the best person to try to get this sort of thing organized. Tyson knew all about caring for animals, but he didn't know the first thing about setting up a town hall meeting, or dealing with the local government at all. That was what the board was for.

Something took flight in his chest when he read her email. She'd managed to get it done. They were getting one final chance to tell the government why they needed their full operating budget. He scanned the details, seeing that it was to be held later this week. Things were happening fast.

Here was a ray of hope for animals like Leah. He had to make sure the newsletter would go out immediately, so they could get as many people as possible at this meeting. And of course, they'd have to promote it elsewhere, perhaps among the many private organizations in the area. If they got a strong showing, maybe the government would consider their appeal.

He thought of Jack, who he had promised to keep apprised of the situation. Jack was on the mailing list, so he'd get the email… but what if he got a personal call instead? Tyson wasn't wholly convinced that Jack was as invested as he seemed to be, but if he came to the town hall meeting, Tyson would just about melt.

This cheered him up just a little bit. He made his way to the front desk and checked his phone for Jack's number. Hopefully he

would pick up.

"Hello? This is Tyson. May I speak with Jack?"

There was silence, but a dog barked in the background—Harold. Maybe Mia had picked up the phone. "Hi," said Mia very quietly and politely. Tyson could barely hear her. "Just a moment."

"Hello? Tyson?"

"Hey, Jack." Tyson suddenly felt nervous all over again, like he was a kid in high school mooning over a crush. "How are things?"

"Good. Mia and Harold continue to be inseparable. You?"

"All right… I wanted to call and let you know about the town hall meeting."

"Oh yeah. So it's happening?"

Well, he certainly sounded interested. "Yeah," said Tyson. "It's at the Stone Creek branch of the library, which is just ten minutes from here. Saturday at 11 o'clock in the morning."

"I'll be there."

"Really?"

"Of course," said Jack, as if it were obvious. "How could I not? After all the shelter, and you, have done for me."

"Well," said Tyson, pleasantly surprised. "I guess I'll see you at the meeting."

"Definitely. Talk to you later, Tyson."

Tyson was left breathing heavily, like he'd just run a marathon. He was glad no one else was in the lobby at the moment, because he had completely let his guard down during the conversation with Jack. He was so infatuated, it was overwhelming. Jack was just so goddamn cute, and every time Tyson expected to be disappointed, Jack surprised him. He was actually going to come to the town hall meeting.

On the other hand, maybe he was just being nice. Maybe he had no intention of coming at all, or maybe he'd just forget. Tyson couldn't get his hopes up too high, because that was a surefire recipe for disappointment. If Jack showed up, awesome. If he didn't, then it figured.

Tyson would have to directly ask him out at some point, though. He couldn't keep waffling around like this. It reminded him of high school, when he would just hope to run into his crushes in the lunch line, at club meetings, between classes. He'd never seek them out himself and actually take the initiative. He'd just wait and hope.

It hadn't worked out at all, and it wasn't going to work now.

He sighed. Why did things have to happen all at once?

Twelve – Jack

There were a lot of people here. Jack wasn't used to speaking up in front of large crowds of people. It was one of the primary reasons he chose to work from home. Already, he could feel his palms starting to get clammy, but he took a deep breath and walked in, Mia trailing behind him curiously. He had to be strong, at least for her. What kind of a parent would he be if he didn't show her that speaking up for what you believed in was the right thing to do?

There were chairs set up in this large conference room, and they filed in and took a seat. Jack couldn't spot Tyson or any of the other people he recognized from the shelter, so he turned to Mia. He'd already tried discussing the issue with her, and though she hadn't fully understood it, she had picked up on his fervor.

"You think Harold is having a party while we're gone?" he asked.

"I think he misses us," said Mia sadly.

Well, maybe Harold wasn't the best topic of conversation.

"You want to check out some books after this meeting? We can pick some out to take home."

"Really?" She tilted his head at him, not unlike Harold. He wondered if she was picking up behavioral cues from the puppy.

"Yeah. I have a library card, so that means we can check out books. You can pick out any books you want."

"Hmm," said Mia. She turned away from him, reticent again. Maybe she was thinking about Harold, at home alone.

She was a little more interactive, and getting better every day, but he was still having a hard time getting her to express her own opinions. She seemed allergic to it for some reason, and while there was progress on some days, there was regression on others. For the past couple of days, she and Harold had retreated into their own world.

Still, there was progress overall, and that was what mattered. Even though he hadn't thought she'd want to come to the town hall meeting—he'd explained that it could get really boring—she'd seemed particularly clingy. When finally pressed for an answer, she'd said yes.

So now, here she was. Jack had packed some snacks and a couple of coloring books in case she got bored, but for now, she was looking around at everyone. When her eyes lit up, he followed her line of sight to see Tyson enter the room.

He smiled at Tyson, who smiled back briefly, but his expression was tight. Of course—this meeting really was a big deal for him, so he was probably busy. Jack would have to wait to speak with

him after the meeting.

But wait. What would they even talk about? Just because Tyson had personally called him to invite him didn't mean anything. Jack shook his head. His imagination was leading him astray yet again. Typical.

When a severe-looking man in a gray suit took the podium, the chatter in the room died down. Jack vaguely recognized the guy as one of the local politicians, someone high up in the county government, but he couldn't have said his title. They all blurred together for him, seeming more or less the same. He looked like he would have fit right in on a national TV network though, talking about politics.

His presence made Jack squirm even more. Now the back of his neck was getting uncomfortably damp. It didn't help that the room was a little warm, probably due to all the people present. He'd never really gotten into community issues before, never feeling like part of the community he lived in. This was the first time he was behaving like an actual stakeholder.

"We're here today to discuss the budget proposal for the Redwood County Animal Shelter," said the politician. "Some of you may know me already. My name is Gary Perle, member of the Board of Supervisors, and I'd like to answer some basic questions about the budget first, as I'm the one who works the most closely with the county's budgeting office. Here to moderate is my assistant, George."

A young man took a second mic from Gary—who did not look at all happy to be present—and scanned the room, looking for raised hands. He called on a woman sitting to Jack's left and scurried over, handing her the mic.

"I'd like to ask, first off, why the shelter's operational budget was cut. It's what they need to run the place. What were these expenses reallocated to?" she asked.

It was a good question. Jack had assumed that the budget simply wasn't that big this year, but now, he realized that it was possible they had shifted things around. The thought got his hackles up; sure, potholes sucked, but to lay people off and condemn innocent animals to death? It wasn't right.

Gary sighed. "We actually weren't planning to announce this until the beginning of the fiscal year, but the situation has forced our hand. While some of the cuts were due to lowered tax revenue, we also took some funding for a new initiative for Redwood County Public Schools. It's one of the first of its kind in the region, and we're proud of it, despite the circumstances. We've spoken with mental health professionals, school administrators, and representatives for the LGBT community, and we're proud to present the Redwood County

Anti-Bullying Initiative."

There was a thick silence. Jack was astonished. Had he heard correctly? Were they implementing some kind of program to prevent queer kids from getting bullied in school? That wasn't the mundane infrastructure project Jack had envisioned. It sounded almost… worthwhile.

He glanced at Mia, who was looking on, clearly picking up on the emotional atmosphere rather than the board member's words. He then glanced at Tyson, whose eyes were a little wide with astonishment. No one had expected this, judging by the looks on everyone's faces.

Well, shit. You couldn't take money away from LGBT kids getting bullied, or any kids, really. This was going to be tough. How many people were revising their opinions right now? Homeless animals, or bullied children? How could you even choose?

He had to guess that Tyson would still appeal on behalf of the shelter—he worked there, after all. It was his coworkers who were going to lose their jobs, and his job that would become harder. And it wasn't like he was gay. Well, maybe he was. Jack wouldn't be able to tell.

But he'd promised Tyson he'd come here and support him, so he had to say something. He wasn't one to back out on a promise, especially not to someone he wanted to impress.

Impress? Jack rolled his eyes at himself and opened up the notes app on his phone, where he'd written down a few talking points so he'd know what to say. He was sure he could extemporize decently, as long as he basically knew what he was going to say, but now, he revised his notes out of nervousness.

"Does anyone else have any questions before we open it up to the public?" asked Gary, pacing the front of the room. He scanned everyone's faces almost like he was a military guy scanning for a threat, and Jack felt himself shrink a little when he passed over him. He was not expecting a guy like this to be so in favor of supporting queer kids, but people could always surprise you.

"No? Then I'll have George pick people who want to speak. Please keep in mind that people from my office will be taking notes on what you say. The whole point of this meeting is to see what our constituents think. Now, I'll open the floor to all of you." Gary stepped aside, and George stepped up, bright eyes scanning for raised hands.

Now was the time. Jack had to say his piece. It was like being in high school all over again. He didn't want to volunteer to go first, but on the other hand, if he got it over with quickly, then he'd feel a lot better.

"Yes, you, over there," said George, picking a woman from the

right side of the room. She walked up to the front.

Shit, couldn't he just stay in his seat with the microphone? Did he really have to walk up there too? He tried to put the thoughts out of his mind as he listened to the woman speak.

"My name is Teresa, and I'm from Holbrook. My son, David, attempted suicide last spring because he was bullied for being gay. Redwood County is normally an accepting place, but children can, unfortunately, be cruel." She sniffed. "We *need* to emphasize to our kids that bullying people and calling them names is wrong, period, whether they're LGBT or not. No child should have to endure that kind of pain."

She rubbed her eyes and hesitated like she was going to say something else, but wasn't sure what. "I support the anti-bullying initiative. I am sorry that the money is being taken from the shelter, but if it helps stop other kids from going through the same thing as David…"

She handed the mic back to George and scurried back to her seat, hand to her face like she was trying to conceal her tears. This wasn't going to be easy, was it? She made a very compelling point. Jack was losing the will to speak with every passing minute.

He glanced at Tyson, whose mouth was twisted into a frown. No. There was no way he could let Tyson down. He had to do it.

More people spoke after Teresa, and every time George looked for someone to call on, Jack's hand rose a little higher. First, he raised it tentatively, like he was hoping George wouldn't call on him. But six people later, he raised it high. He might as well get it over with.

When George finally chose him to speak, he got up, glanced at Mia—who had a big smile on her face, a smile of pride—and walked to the front. He hadn't realized Mia would be proud of him. Despite everything, that made this worth it.

When he got up to the podium, he glanced down at the notes on his phone to get started, his palms becoming sweaty again. Right. First, his name and neighborhood. Then, his points.

"Hi, I'm Jack from over in Redwood Station. I'd like to support the appeal for the county's animal shelter. Recently, I adopted a dog named Harold in an effort to better connect with my adopted daughter and welcome her to my home. The shelter staff was immensely helpful, passionate about their jobs, and committed to helping not only the animals in their care, but also others in the county, thanks to their classes, workshops, and other resources. The shelter has been with us every step of the way and I couldn't be more thankful that they are the smoothly run, well-funded resource that they are. Thank you."

He tried not to scurry back, instead calmly and deliberately

handing the mic back to George and striding back down the aisle to sit with Mia, who was beaming, her legs waving back and forth as they hung over the chair. “You were so cool,” she whispered.

“Thanks, Mia,” he whispered back, his heart bursting. This was everything he had ever wanted—to be a role model for a child. He had shown her that it was good to be brave and stand up for what you believed in. The admiration in her eyes meant everything to him.

He looked over at where Tyson had been standing, and the beautiful man smiled at him, green eyes sparkling. Jack didn’t think he could feel any more pleased with himself, and his cheeks flushed. Speaking up had absolutely been the right decision, on all accounts.

A few more people spoke after that, and then the meeting was adjourned. Gary promised to have his office send updates to those who provided their emails, but Jack figured he’d hear from the shelter, anyway. There was a great commotion when Gary and his office staff stepped away and everyone was free to get up. Jack could catch snippets of conversation about everything people had said, but he blocked it out of his mind, turning to Mia and helping her gather her things.

He cast around, looking for Tyson, but he couldn’t see him. He was probably busy with the other shelter staff, anyway, and Jack had accomplished what he had come for. Maybe Tyson would call him again. That’d be nice.

Mia led the way out of conference room, weaving through a sea of legs, and they entered the quiet main part of the library, where she went off to the children’s section. Jack followed her as she excitedly pored over the shelves, but his mind was on what everyone had been saying.

Overall, it seemed that people wanted the shelter to be funded, despite Teresa’s bombshell of an appeal that had started off the discussion. No one had criticized the need for shelters or anti-bullying programs, but had instead talked about why their cause was necessary. It was remarkably civil. Jack had half-expected the room to burst out in chaos, with people debating each other viciously.

He was glad it hadn’t gotten that bad.

Mia tugged on his hand and showed him the books she had chosen.

He took the books from her and briefly looked over them. Most of the titles had dogs on the cover, unsurprisingly. “Looks good. Let’s go get you a library card, then check them out.”

“I get my own?” she asked.

“That’s right.”

She didn’t answer, but the smile on her face was wide as they walked to the front desk. Today had clearly been a good day in the

world of Mia. Maybe getting over one of his own fears had helped Mia come out of her own shell a little bit. While she was still a little quiet, she had expressed quite a few opinions today, and seemed to have had no problem choosing books.

"I'm gonna read them with Harold," she said.

God, that was cute. "Good idea. You can teach him to read, too."

Mia giggled. "He's a dog!"

"But he's a smart one, isn't he?" Jack winked at her.

Mia bounced around him in delight as the librarian at the desk handed him the form for a children's library card. Jack smiled and started to fill it out. He was going to have to get used to seeing the name "Mia Keppel," but he was never going to get tired of it.

Thirteen – Tyson

Tyson gave some of the other staff a ride back to the shelter. During the trip, they were all chattering animatedly. The general mood was that everyone was glad that people wanted the shelter to be funded, but they were disturbed that they were seemingly fighting against an equally good cause.

Tyson wasn't participating in the chatter; instead, he was quiet, thinking about Jack. He was astounded that the man had even shown up, and had even prepared something to say. Tyson wouldn't have thought of Jack as the type to be shy in front of large groups of people, but now that he thought about it, it made sense. He was pretty shy in general.

And he'd given a lovely, heartfelt spiel about how the shelter was a great resource and had helped him and Mia. The fact that she was adopted too was an extra touch which emphasized the emotional appeal.

However, Teresa's revelation about her son attempting suicide seemed to have jarred everyone. It was just so visceral, and it left Tyson deeply conflicted. He knew what it was like to go through that pain.

He'd never gotten as bad as poor David, who had felt compelled to act on his depression, but middle school had been a slog for Tyson. By the time he'd gotten to high school, attitudes had shifted somewhat, and people no longer bullied openly gay kids.

But there was still the pervasive attitude that it was a weird thing to be and it classed you with a different subculture of people, never mind the fact that Tyson just wanted a normal life. He hadn't come out until senior year, when he'd found a group of friends who had made him feel comfortable enough to do so. But the pressure to hide himself had been rough, and after graduating, he'd broken free like a butterfly, aligning himself with the various queer scenes around the city.

If Jack was gay, then he didn't seem like he'd made it out of the cocoon. Maybe that was what made him seem so restrained. Maybe he was a gay guy that had never truly accepted it because he had something in his life that made him need to hide himself. It was parents, probably. Tyson had been blessed with ones who were accepting, but he knew many people were not.

He sighed as they pulled into the shelter's parking lot. No matter what, he was going to fight for the shelter—he had to. He was the one who would have to deal with the effects of the budget shortfall: fewer staff, fewer material resources, less money for

programs, and of course, his beloved animals being sent to certain death.

It was impossible to determine which was more urgent: kids who were bullied, or animals who were going to be euthanized. Most people would probably pick the kids, simply because they prioritized humans. There was nothing wrong with that train of thought.

But for someone like Tyson, who worked with animals every day and had formed deep relationships with many of them, the choice was more difficult. If he didn't have an affiliation with the shelter already, he had no idea what he would decide.

He headed back to the front desk and read through some emails, then checked the shelter's answering machine. Nothing of note. As he set the phone down, his thoughts drifted to Jack. Should he ask him out? He should—it was obvious. But how? Wouldn't it be best to do it in person? A phone call was a close second.

He was really just making excuses by overthinking it. He just had to do it. But he couldn't help but succumb to that wave of apprehension that ultimately prevented him from doing it. If Jack was weird about it, or even worse, homophobic, it would ruin everything. His image of Jack, Mia, and Harold, a happy little family, would be ruined. To imagine Mia growing up with those attitudes… It made him shudder.

But at least if he knew, then he could move on. He had to face facts: his crush on Jack was bugging him on practically an hourly basis. He couldn't leave himself in limbo like this.

On the other hand, he could try to take his mind off of things another way. There was one gay bar in all of Redwood County. It was actually a pretty nice place, seeing as most people in the area were accepting, so it wasn't an underground kind of bar with an illicit feeling. You could find people of all ages there, not just horny twenty-somethings. It was a place where the older generation could go to just have fun, too.

But then, Tyson *was* a horny twenty-something, and he could go for another kind of fun. Maybe if he slept with someone else, he'd get his craving for Jack out of his system. It was always so refreshing to go to a place where he *knew* the other guys would be gay, where he wouldn't have to go through this torturous thought process, trying to figure out if he should take the risk with Jack or not. He could just find a guy and ask him out without fear.

It was tempting.

But he knew how it would make him feel: empty. Tyson had had casual sex before, back when he was in the community college and while he had lived in the Bay area—there had been no shortage of gay guys there, true to the stereotype. He had thought that hooking up

was the thing to do when you were a horny young person. But it had never felt truly satisfying. Sure, it had been hot, in the moment, and it had felt good to find release with another person. But the next day… It was like having some kind of weird emotional hangover.

No. He couldn't put himself through that again. It was Jack or bust. Maybe if he told Tina he was going to do it, she would hold him accountable. Or maybe he just had to suck it up and call the guy's number.

He pulled out his cell phone and scrolled down to find Jack in his call list, his finger hovering over the numbers. He hesitated just a second too long.

His coworker Meg's voice came echoing down the corridor, filled with urgency. "Tyson! I need your help! Pansy got out of her run!"

He swore under his breath and bolted out of the seat, heading in the direction of her voice. Pansy was a rambunctious young terrier mix, and she gave the more inexperienced staff the slip all the damn time. It was often up to Tyson or one of the other managers to help catch her.

"She ran out the door! Tyson!"

"I'm coming, Meg!" he yelled.

He'd just have to call Jack later.

Fourteen – Jack

The idea had come to him in the middle of the night, like many other half-baked ideas. But in the light of day, it seemed like it could actually be pretty good.

The corporation Jack was contracted with had a large philanthropic arm, and because Jack had been working there for at least a couple years, and was in a senior role, he possibly had some clout there. The foundation was always looking for things to fund to maintain their image, and they especially liked wholesome, local organizations. The shelter would be perfect.

But in order to find out more, he'd have to talk to HR. While he didn't mind doing video chats with his team, he disliked having to make phone calls to people he didn't know. But he was an adult, and he could deal with it, even if it made him nervous.

He found the number through the company's directory and dialed it. As the phone rang, his hands started to grow sweaty, and his heart beat faster. God, he was pathetic. What kind of a grown man got nervous over a damn phone call?

"Bornhill Tech Solutions Human Resources, Cindy speaking."

"Hi, Cindy, I'm Jack, I work in the Engineering Division… I just wanted to ask how I can submit an organization for consideration to the Bornhill Foundation? I just got involved with an animal shelter recently…"

That wasn't so bad. He didn't sound like a total idiot. In fact, he sounded almost coherent.

"Oh good! Well, I can transfer you over to Jason Rudren, who's the guy in charge of reviewing those applications," said Cindy.

"Excellent, yeah, that'd be great, thanks."

"Okay, I'm transferring you now."

Whew. He had a slight reprieve. He hadn't done so badly, but now he'd have to have an in-depth conversation with this Jason. Maybe he'd luck out and Jason would be out of the office. But he did want to get this process set in motion as soon as possible. The end of the county's fiscal year was in less than a month.

"Hello? This is Jason Rudren."

"Hi Jason, I'm Jack Keppel, I'm in Engineering… Cindy told me you were in charge of managing applications for grant requests, and I wanted to submit one."

"Okay, great. I can email you the information packet and forms," said Jason. "You're in the directory, right?"

"Right."

"Just check your email, then."

Jack heard some clicking around, then an email appeared in his inbox.

"Thanks, Jason."

"Sure. Just let me know if you have any questions."

Well, that was way easier than Jack had expected it to be. After hanging up with Jason, he looked over the documents, hope growing in his heart. What if he managed to single-handedly solve the whole problem? That'd really impress Tyson…

The forms looked easy enough; he just had to talk to whoever worked with the finances at the shelter. They would probably help him with the write ups about what the shelter did, too. And there was only one round—if the application went through, the foundation would fund it.

There had to be a catch. Maybe they had specific kinds of organizations they were looking for, or maybe the funding wouldn't come through in time. Or maybe they wouldn't be willing to give enough money to cover the budget shortfall.

He'd never find out if he didn't put in the application, anyway. His hand hovered over his phone—he had to call Tyson to figure out how to proceed, but one phone call had been enough for today. Calling his crush would be too overwhelming.

Instead, he decided to get started on dinner and called Mia down. Moments after he entered the kitchen, he heard the patter of her feet coming down the stairs, along with Harold's thumping, and they trotted into the kitchen obediently.

Harold was more confident on his feet now, and he could go a bit longer between bathroom breaks. He was growing into a handsome and well-behaved young dog, though he couldn't control his puppy exuberance fully. Another of Jack's best leather shoes had been destroyed, but it had been a small price to pay for the effect Harold had on Mia.

"Can I help?" asked Mia, her voice small.

"Help?"

"Like with dinner," she said, nodding at the stove.

"Oh, um, yeah, sure," said Jack, taken by surprise. Mia had never before asked to help make dinner. This was an improvement. Sometimes, he asked her to shell peas or mash potatoes—or at least try to—but she hadn't yet gained the confidence to participate of her own accord. She'd wanted to, he could tell. She'd peered at him curiously from the living room, watching him stir stews and chop up meat.

Mia followed him to the refrigerator. "You want to help chop the carrots?" asked Jack.

Mia gasped when he held up the knife.

"Er, maybe you're not yet ready for a kitchen knife," said Jack. "How about peeling the potatoes?"

Mia nodded vigorously, Harold circling around her feet.

Jack took out the potatoes and peeler and demonstrated a few times. Mia was wiggling like the puppy, clearly eager to get started, so he set her up at the kitchen table and supervised. She was competent. Maybe it was because of the self-sufficiency he had noticed in her earlier.

Quietly, they chopped up the vegetables together, then Jack showed her how to rinse the beans. After throwing everything into the pot, he set it to simmer. Tonight's stew looked like it was going to be a delicious batch. Now they just had to let it simmer, the spices marinating the meat and vegetables. Harold sniffed the air constantly, trying to detect the source of all the smells.

"How much we gotta wait?" asked Mia.

"Just half an hour or so," said Jack. "I like to let it sit for a while so it becomes nice and flavorful."

"I'm hungry," said Mia, rubbing her stomach.

"Me too. But it's gonna be worth it." Jack smiled, then remembered something he had prepared earlier for a moment just like this. "You wanna see something special? I've been wanting to show you for a while."

Mia tilted her head and nodded once.

Jack went into the living room, his small entourage faithfully following him. He had set a couple of binders on the lower shelf of the coffee table, and sat down on the couch, pulling them out. He patted the seat next to him, and girl and dog practically leaped into it, curious as to what his surprise was.

"So, you know baseball? My dad was really into it," Jack started, "and he gave me this collection of baseball cards."

Honestly, he hadn't been sure whether she'd even be interested in baseball, but he figured that sharing something that was important to him for a reason—regardless of what it was—would be a good move.

She leaned into his lap, Harold in her arms, and peered at the cards. So she was definitely interested. That was a good sign.

"When I was little, I played baseball with other kids, and my dad coached me. It was a way my dad and I got to spend time together," he continued, encouraged by her wide eyes. She was listening intently. "He passed these cards on to me because he didn't want them anymore, and because they're valuable. He got some of them from his dad, my grandfather. Some of these are actually worth thousands of dollars."

"What?" Mia scrunched up her face.

Jack laughed. “Yeah. I know it’s hard to believe. They don’t look like they’re worth that much, but they are.”

“Wow.” Mia tilted her head just like Harold, staring at the cards in disbelief.

“I’d never sell them, though,” said Jack. “They’re special because my dad gave them to me.”

Mia nodded sagely. For a seven year old, she sure understood a lot. But he couldn’t explain everything to her—why he wasn’t on the best of terms with his dad, why he struggled against his parents’ voices in his head. These baseball cards were a potent reminder of the connection he had had with his father, back when he was a kid, and concepts like being gay had never even entered his consciousness.

It hadn’t mattered back then, and maybe he was remembering it all wrong, but his dad had seemed happier then too. He’d been less uptight, less strict. Maybe it was because Jack had been a little kid, and there was less to be strict about. As he entered high school, his parents had emphasized the importance of good grades. It had been downhill from there.

But he didn’t have to think about that now. These baseball cards could now forge a new connection between him and Mia. Even if she wasn’t interested in playing baseball—though who knew, maybe she would get into sports when she got older—she was still interested in spending time with Jack. She *wanted* to build a bond, and that was something surprising about children that Jack had learned. They had a drive to connect with their caretakers.

It was powerful.

As he flipped through the binder and told Mia about his favorite players and pointed out the rarest cards, he felt the bond grow. Harold had fallen asleep in Mia’s lap, as usual, as Jack told his stories to a rapt audience. When the timer went off for the stew, he realized he had almost forgotten about it, and how hungry he had been.

“Time to eat,” said Mia, hopping off the couch and scurrying to the kitchen, Harold sleepily following.

Jack closed the binder and set it down happily. These cards had done exactly what he had wanted them to. Maybe one day, Mia would pass them down to her children, and so on and so forth.

It was a beautiful thought.

Fifteen – Tyson

With a gentle chiming sound, Tyson's alarm went off, increasing in volume and drawing him out of sleep. He blinked groggily, uncertain of whether his dream had been real. But as he entered the waking world, it faded away like smoke.

He grabbed his phone and turned the alarm off, lying in bed. It had been a very… sexy dream, that was for sure, and it had involved Jack. Tyson sighed. The universe was practically beating him over the head with hints that he should ask Jack out, but he was still refusing to listen.

And now he was left with an aching case of morning wood. His hand snaked down and he found that he was extraordinarily stiff, though the details of the dream had faded away. He was simply left with a warm, urgent feeling and the desperate desire for release. His alarm had apparently interrupted whatever had been happening in his dream.

As he stroked himself, he couldn't help but imagine what Jack would be like in bed. He was shy in real life, almost with a dash of anxiety, but people could become completely different behind closed doors, after all. What if Jack turned out to be enthusiastic and energetic, the way Tyson imagined him to be? What if all that repression dissipated when sex was involved?

His fantasies took flight. He could just feel Jack's body hovering over him, his cock situated at his entrance, hard and ready to penetrate him, hands roaming his skin and squeezing and kneading his muscles, humid breath against his neck and sharp scent permeating the air…

It wasn't long before he came, sighing in relief. That hadn't been an orgasm of pure pleasure, it had been an orgasm of need. He couldn't have gone about his day without getting rid of that damn erection, left over from whatever sex dream he had apparently had.

He rested a moment, taking his phone and scrolling through his emails, then rolled out of bed. He couldn't spend another minute there if he wanted to get to the shelter on time. Today was an important day.

As the shower washed away the vestiges of his dream, he turned his mind to more practical matters. Namely, what would be the results of today's meeting? After the town hall meeting, the budgeting office had reconvened to go over the appeal. They'd promised to get back to the shelter today, and officials from the budgeting office had deigned to come to the shelter to deliver the verdict.

That meant it would be good, right? They wouldn't deliver a

rejection in person, especially surrounded by the animals and people who would be affected. Surely they'd hide behind a telephone or letter if they had bad news.

With this in mind, Tyson had more energy to finish up his bath, shave, and head in to the shelter. It was a good day—the sky was clear, allowing the sun to warm up the town, and it felt like it was actually summer.

Everyone else had come to the same conclusion as him—they wouldn't deliver bad news in person. The overall mood was optimistic. Even if they couldn't get the extra funding for their extra projects, they would at least be able to cover all their operating expenses, preventing the need for layoffs and animal transfers.

Still, the fact that now they'd be taking money away from children being bullied made Tyson uncomfortable. He knew that was a dire cause, too. Teresa's son David had become local news, not just because he had attempted suicide, but also because there had been an investigation of the bullies. The whole event had been the catalyst for this new initiative.

But it didn't matter now, anyway. The officials had made their decision, whatever it was, and they were going to arrive shortly to deliver it. All the shelter staff could do was wait.

Tyson tried to go about his duties as if it were another ordinary day, but it was impossible. He found himself jittery and distracted, and the dogs could tell, their eyes following him curiously as he scrubbed the runs.

Finally, he heard Tina calling him. "Hey, Tyson? They're here."

He regretted having to meet them while wearing dirty work clothes, but he was in the same boat as the others, at least, and Sandra had come in to represent them in a pantsuit. That board member, Gary, wasn't there, and he didn't recognize any of the officials who had come, but they introduced themselves as representatives of the budgeting division.

"Hello," said the leader of the group, Tony, with a tight smile. "Is there a conference room we can gather in?"

Sandra led everyone to the boardroom, and Tyson scoped out the emotional tension in the air, emanating from the officials. They looked distinctly uncomfortable, their eyes flicking about and their expressions tight. They didn't look relaxed, like they would be if they were delivering good news. And they probably would have just told them out in the lobby, not in the boardroom.

Thanks to all the thoughts running through his mind, Tyson knew what the verdict was even before they all sat down.

Tony spoke up, his expression a weird cross between a fake smile and a grimace. "Thank you for meeting with us today," he said,

standing up at the head of the table, next to Sandra. “Your appeal was strong, and while we truly believe that the shelter is a good cause, we regret to inform you that the appeal was rejected.”

There was a collective release of tension as the blow resonated through the shelter staff. It was quickly replaced by growing anger—shoulders hunched, eyebrows knit together, frowns widening. Tyson wasn’t surprised at all, but that didn’t stop him from becoming upset as well.

A profoundly awkward silence followed, as all the shelter staff thought through the implications. Finally, someone spoke up—Mari. She was new, though not new enough to be one of the folks who would be laid off.

“You do realize this will directly cause dogs to be killed, right?” she said.

Sandra cringed and shot her a glare, as if she were an unruly teenager—which she was, actually.

Tony’s pursed his lips. “Our decision is final. We are not unsympathetic to the plight of the animals here. But we’re not using the money for shrubbery and retail development. We’re using it to help LGBT kids who are being bullied. It’s an equally worthy cause, especially when so many of them develop mental illness, even suicidal thoughts, because of it.”

Mari had nothing to say to that, but the scowl remained on her face.

Tony’s enthusiasm for the anti-bullying initiative made Tyson wonder if he was gay, or knew someone who had been affected by bullying. But it didn’t matter, anyway—he was right. The cause was equally worthy, and the decision had already been made by higher ups. There was no point in berating the messengers.

“Does anyone have any questions?” asked Tony.

“You don’t even have a little bit to spare?” asked Meg, one of the vet techs. “It’s not an all or nothing situation.”

“Well,” said Tony, sighing heavily, “like Gary said at the town hall meeting, we’ve had to work with decreased tax revenue this year, so there was less to go around overall. That was a major factor.”

“I see,” said Meg, though she didn’t sound convinced.

Couldn’t they have found the funds somewhere? Anywhere? There had to be something wasteful in the budget. But then, Tyson was not a guy who handled finances, so what did he know. Maybe it really was that tight. It wasn’t like this was the federal government, or a wealthier local government, after all.

“If there aren’t any more questions, we’ll take our leave now,” said Tony. “Please feel free to contact my office if you have other questions or concerns.” He took out some business cards and started

handing them out.

"I sure have a lot of concerns," whispered Tina next to him. Despite himself, Tyson smiled a little.

After the officials left, no one seemed to want to continue working, but they did, for the animals' sake. Runs had to be cleaned, and food had to be doled out. The overall mood was depressed, and people weren't as cheerful and talkative as they normally were. Of course, the animals picked up on this, and didn't bark or yowl as much either. It was as if it were a quiet, rainy day.

Thankfully, the time flew by somehow, and before he knew it, it was the end of the day. The shelter was closed to visitors, and Tyson just had to take care of some paperwork first.

He thought about telling Jack about the officials' verdict, but he didn't feel up to it. The thought of having to tell someone else seemed emotionally taxing, and anyway, Jack would get the email update. Tyson didn't want to be so depressed, especially considering the money *was* going to a good cause, but it was difficult. Some of the animals who had been here a long time were almost like coworkers to him; he couldn't just deliver them to their deaths.

Especially Leah. That poor dog had been here well over a year; her owners had abandoned her because they didn't want to pay for the mounting vet bills. Older dogs got all kinds of illnesses, just like older people. The shelter didn't have the funds to pay for surgery for her cataracts, but they'd been able to take care of everything else, and at least, they'd still been willing to love her.

He shook his head, at a loss. Earlier, he'd thought of finding someone himself to adopt Leah. Maybe that idea was worth revisiting. But doing it for all the other dogs was a daunting task.

He took out his phone and sent the shelter management listserv an email about holding a last ditch adoption fair for the dogs and cats who were going to be transferred. If they could save even one pet's life, it would be worth doing. And they held adoption fairs on a regular basis, so they knew the drill.

And hell, he had a marketing degree—he had to know how to promote the dogs on social media, through PR… Maybe they could even get some donations. There was stuff they could still do. He couldn't just give up and let those animals go. People in Redwood County had money, and as a guy with a background in marketing, he had to know how to get them to part with it.

Sixteen – Jack

"Harold! Good job, you did it!" said Jack, overemphasizing his delight. Harold had finally gone twenty-hour hours being totally potty-trained. He'd managed to wait until they let him outside, and he'd even started to learn how to use some bells on the door to let him know when he needed to go.

The dog was making fast progress. He was a master of sit and stay, and was now learning to heel. It was as if learning one command made it easier to learn another, and so on. He was becoming more and more well-behaved by the day, though he still had an inclination to chew up shoes. Jack had started keeping them in the closet.

Mia knelt down and gave the puppy a hug. He wasn't as roly-poly anymore. Instead, he was alert and bright-eyed, even a little more athletic. His coordination was improving. Before, when they'd thrown him tennis balls, he'd missed completely. But now, he was able to leap up and catch most of them in his mouth.

And with his growing confidence came Mia's growing personality. She'd already seemed like a competent, opinionated girl. But now, she was truly blossoming. Jack was learning about her preferences and thoughts more often now, even when there were still times when she preferred to keep to herself.

"That's a relief," said Jack. "Hopefully we don't have to deal with any more accidents in the house, huh, Harold?"

The dog tilted his head at him, wagging his tail vigorously. He was so enthusiastic that his furry butt was shaking too. This dog didn't just wag his tail; he wagged his entire rear end—an endless source of giggles for Mia.

"Jack?" asked Mia.

"Yes?" He still wasn't used to her addressing him, for some reason, probably because she so rarely asked for things she wanted directly.

"Can we take Harold on a walk?"

"Of course," said Jack, pleased and surprised. They'd taken Harold around the block recently, to teach him to heel, but they'd never gone on a proper walk down to the shops on the main road. He'd been too young and too excitable, but now that he was a little older and better behaved, it was about time.

And Mia had decided that for herself. She never failed to surprise Jack, showing him that she was more perceptive than the average seven year old.

He helped her get Harold into the harness they used for longer trips, which he was now associating with fun times. He was becoming

more curious about the world, eager to see new things and sniff them —or pee on them. He and Mia seemed to be growing together. Jack hadn't yet taken her down to the shops, and he knew an ice cream place that would make a perfect surprise.

The weather was good, thankfully—cloudless and sunny—and they trotted off at a brisk pace, passing by the familiar sights of Jack's neighbors' houses and yards. Despite the name, the Redwood Station neighborhood didn't have any redwoods. It was more like a prototypical suburban neighborhood, with wide streets, deciduous trees, and even white picket fences around some of the houses.

As Mia pranced ahead with Harold, Jack couldn't help but think about how he'd never wanted to live out in the suburbs. He'd thought it was lame. As a gay guy in San Diego, he'd thought city life was the height of cool. All the bars and restaurants had been amazing. But his tastes changed, and he found himself wanting peace and quiet and space. Redwood County afforded him that.

"Turn left here," said Jack, calling out to the dog and the girl. His heart leaped up into his chest at how carefree they seemed—it was sweet, but there was the occasional car whizzing by, and he didn't know how much she'd internalized of his lecture on road safety.

But she was smarter than she looked. She'd been a foster closer to the city, in a bad neighborhood, and she had to have learned all this while she was there. The suburbs were deserted in comparison. Still, he couldn't help but remind her to be careful. Was this what being a parent was like? Constantly worrying? No wonder his mother had asked him how much he ate every day, well into his twenties. He could take care of himself just fine, but she just had to know.

And now he didn't talk to her much. He saw his parents a couple times a year, but it was hard to see someone who thought they knew so much about you, when you knew they didn't. They had no idea he was interested in men at all, and given their harsh words toward LGBT people in the past, he had no intention of telling them.

Maybe that was one of the blocks he had about finding a partner now. He liked Tyson, could see himself dating the man—but if he dated anyone, then he'd inevitably have to introduce them to his parents. And that was not a conversation he was willing to have. All the scenarios that played out in his head ended in complete disaster.

But if he wanted a partner, he'd have to deal with it. Again, it was clear that he was in a self-imposed limbo. He had every other part of his life down pat: the house, the career, even the child and the dog. But no partner. It was unusual to skip that part. It was usually the one many people got settled first.

"Right here," said Jack, catching up to Mia and Harold. They'd reached the outskirts of the residential part of the neighborhood and

had found themselves in the commercial district. Mia hadn't yet crossed this border yet, and her eyes were wide as she looked at the colorful shops and restaurants.

They turned on to the street; not many people were here today. They usually came out at night, as some of the restaurants were only open for dinner. But every so often, there'd be some kind of event that would draw people.

As they approached the end of the street, where there was a park with a fountain, he heard a lot more people and saw that a crowd had formed. His heart jolted when he realized that it was an event having to do with the animal shelter. There were several dogs wearing crimson bandannas, tongues hanging out, soliciting attention from the people surrounding them. Some cats were present too, peering at people from their carriers.

And of course, Tyson was there. Mia noticed too. "Jack, look!"

"Yeah," he said weakly. "I see. You wanna go say hi?"

She became shy again, remaining silent.

"Let's go look at the other dogs, at least," he said.

As they approached, Jack could read the banner on the table. It was an adoption drive. But there was something off about all the dogs and cats here. He spotted a couple dogs who looked disabled, one of whom had only three legs, and many of the others showed signs of age, muzzles grey-white, skins sagging, and eyes glazed over.

He knew adoption drives were common, but this was weird. What was going on?

Tyson spotted him before he could say anything, and a wide smile broke out on the man's face when Jack turned to him. "Hey, Jack! How are you? How's Harold, Mia?"

Jack smiled shyly. He wanted to continue talking to Tyson, but he also wanted to run in the other direction and never be seen again. Such was the reality of having a crush. "We're good. And how about you? How's this adoption drive going?"

To Jack's surprise, Tyson frowned. "I'm all right, and the drive is going okay… Did you get the shelter newsletter?"

"No, I've been out for a while. Why?"

"So… Here, come with me."

Tyson broke off from the group and walked to the edge of the crowd, Jack now intrigued. He kept an eye on Mia, who had Harold securely on his leash and was looking at the cats. Harold was calm too, not particularly interested in the other dogs at the moment.

"The appeal didn't go through," said Tyson quietly.

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Not even part of it. But I didn't get to thank you for coming out to the town hall meeting. It was kind of you to do that,"

he continued.

"No problem at all, least I could do," said Jack. "I meant what I said."

Tyson's smile was warm, despite the worry in his eyes. "Well, I appreciate it."

"So what's going to happen now? Is that why you're having this adoption drive?"

"Part of our contingency plan involves sending animals to the animal control shelter, where they'll probably be euthanized," said Tyson with a sigh. "This is our last ditch effort to find homes for them."

"Wow." Jack was stunned at the fact that it was all falling apart, especially when it had seemed like they had hope.

"Yeah. It sucks." Tyson shook his head. "I wish there was something we can do, but it's too late to put in grant requests, and the end of the fiscal year is just weeks away."

"I'm sorry, Tyson," said Jack. Should he tell him about what he was trying to do with the Bornhill Foundation? No, he didn't want to give poor Tyson false hope. He'd just have to see if anything came of his application, and if it did, then he could announce it to them.

"It's life as a shelter worker," Tyson said, shrugging. "You can't save 'em all."

"Yeah." Jack had no idea what to say. Even though he was glad for the opportunity to talk to Tyson, he felt immensely awkward. He was never the kind of person who was good at being comforting, or even knowing the right words to make someone feel better.

"Anyway," said Tyson, hesitating. "I wanted to ask… are you free next week?"

"Next week?" repeated Jack dumbly.

"Yeah, like for dinner."

"Dinner? Um, yeah. I'm free in the evenings."

"Good." Tyson seemed relaxed, but he was still skeptical about something. "I mean, like a date, you know."

"Yeah, yeah, I got that. Yeah." It had taken him a while to process, though. He wasn't sure he was going to fully process it until he got home and had time to himself.

"Great. Um, how does Tuesday sound?"

"It's just fine," said Jack.

Tyson smiled finally. "Cool. I'll text you the time and place."

"And I'll find someone to keep an eye on Mia and Harold." Jack looked over at them. They had made friends with one of the cats who was sitting in the bottom row of carriers.

"I'll see you then," said Tyson. "Bye, Jack."

And before Jack could say anything else, Tyson had melted

back into the crowd, leaving Jack totally dumbfounded.

Jack walked up to Mia. “Who’s this that you’ve met?”

“Alice,” said Mia. “She’s an old lady.”

“She’s not an old lady, she’s a cat!” said Jack.

Mia pursed his lips at him, but she couldn’t keep it up for long. Her face eventually broke out into a laugh, and she giggled for a whole minute, something inside her letting loose and going into the world, free.

Seventeen – Tyson

If Tyson hadn't met Jack at the adoption fair, he might never have asked him out. So it was really serendipitous that they had run into each other that day. It was the universe's final clue to him: ask him out, already, damn it. So Tyson had.

And even more surprising was the fact that Jack had said yes. The guy seemed so bashful that Tyson hadn't even been sure that he knew he was asking him out on a date. But after some clarification, Tyson had confirmed it.

Jack was gay. Or maybe bi. But he was definitely interested in men.

Despite the gloom of the adoption drive—where the shelter staff knew what awaited the animals if they didn't catch someone's eye—Tyson had his own personal triumph and something to look forward to. He had a date with Jack. He still couldn't believe it.

He couldn't even remember the last time he had been on a date, and he had so many questions to ponder. How should he behave? Should he dress up a bit, or take him somewhere fancy? Would he have to impress Jack at all?

Nah. Jack was clearly not the fancy type. He wore sweatshirts and jeans all the time, and had an easygoing demeanor about him. That was part of what had attracted Tyson to him in the first place.

In the end, Tyson had decided on a relaxed Mexican restaurant in the downtown part of Redwood Station, where the adoption fair had been. Still unable to believe his luck, he had almost hesitated to text Jack. What if he had imagined the whole thing? But his rational side won out, and he was relieved to get a confirmation from Jack, who sounded a lot more formal in writing than he did in person.

And today was the day. Tyson picked out one of his nicest button downs, one that didn't have the stain of a muddy pawprint on it or the lingering odor of wet dog. And he had a nice pair of rarely-worn jeans for the occasion too—all his others were cheap department store denim, ones he wouldn't mind getting muddy and torn and scuffed.

He didn't like to use his car too often, but this was a special occasion, after all, and he didn't want to be late. After pulling in to the public parking lot, he walked to the restaurant. The streets were gorgeous in the evening, with the cool summer breeze and lights strung on building façades and trees. People were sitting on restaurant patios, conversing, while children bounced around in the park.

Jack was sitting on a bench outside the restaurant, and Tyson panicked for a second, wondering if he was late. "Hey," he said. "I

hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

"It's fine. Mia's babysitter showed up really early, so I decided to just head out." He shrugged, then stood up. "It's great to see you. You clean up well." His mouth twisted into that shy smile again, the one that made Tyson's heart flutter.

"Thanks. You look good too."

They entered the restaurant and got seated at their table. Tyson immediately felt at ease; the restaurant looked sufficiently cool, but was casual enough. He'd made a good choice.

"So, how've things been at the shelter lately?" asked Jack.

"Okay," said Tyson. He looked away, wondering how to update Jack but also keep things light. He didn't have to talk about the budget problems… Maybe there was a cute anecdote he could share. "I got to facilitate the adoption of a pair of cats to an elderly lady. It was a good day."

"That sounds really sweet," said Jack.

"Yeah. It just feels so good when I make the right match, and I know this is one of them. You know, none of my matches have ever turned out to be wrong." Tyson smiled proudly.

"How do you know?"

"None of them have been returned during the probationary period. There haven't been any problems or incompatibilities," explained Tyson.

"Wow. That is impressive. How do you do it?" Jack rested his head on his hand, rapt. He really did seem impressed.

Tyson was pleased to have an audience. "It's experience, really. I've spent so much time interviewing prospective pet owners that I've become attuned to family dynamics. Having to judge people like that on a regular basis can make you really perceptive."

"That's a great skill," said Jack. "I don't spend enough time around people to develop that kind of ability."

"Well, what do you do? I remember on the application you said you work from home."

"I do software engineering for Bornhill," said Jack. "I have a contract that lets me work from home as long as I participate in video chat meetings. Basically, I go over data, make spreadsheets, do data analysis… it's not really that interesting."

"Bornhill is a pretty big deal though. You must've worked hard to get there."

Tyson really was impressed. Jack had to have a degree, probably also a postgraduate degree, from a prestigious institution like Stanford or Berkeley. And then, he had to have an impressive resume to even get his foot in the door. And on top of that, they allowed him to telecommute.

Jack shrugged. “For most of my life, I just did what my parents told me to do. It worked out pretty well for me. But my job is boring. I want to know more about the shelter. Who’s your favorite dog?”

Tyson felt a pang in his heart, thinking about Leah. The elderly Lab mix was hands down his favorite. But she was also in danger. “There’s one dog, who was at the adoption fair, named Leah. She’s the sweetest old lady, and I would adopt her if I could, especially with this contingency plan going into action.”

“Your place doesn’t allow dogs?”

“No. And they just instituted that rule two months after I moved in. It’s total bullshit.”

“Shame,” said Jack, shaking his head.

That was when the waitress arrived to take their order. “Oh, crap. We’ve been talking so much that I completely forgot to look at the menu,” said Tyson.

“No problem,” she said. She gave them a sweet smile, knowing that they were on a date. “I’ll give you guys a couple minutes.”

“Have you been here before?” asked Jack.

“I haven’t. It was a new place that I wanted to try out.” Tyson scanned the menu, looking for something tasty. Since it was a Mexican restaurant—his favorite kind—the decision was difficult to make. He eventually settled on enchiladas, in the mood for something fried. Then he flipped to the back of the menu. Should he go for beer? Maybe… Why the hell not.

When the waitress returned, they were finally ready. Jack had ordered a beer too, so Tyson wasn’t alone in that. He was glad that they had both made the same decision.

“So how’s Mia doing?” asked Tyson. “I have to ask, if you don’t mind, is she adopted?”

“Yep. I adopted her a couple months ago. Harold has really been helping the transition go more smoothly. That was why I got him, actually.”

Tyson was glad that his suspicion had been confirmed, but he was surprised to learn that Harold had been so helpful for that reason. “How so?”

“Well, at first, she was really shy, and she was having a hard time making decisions and telling me what she wanted. But because she’s partially responsible for Harold now, she’s become a lot more confident. She’s like Harold’s big sister. It’s really adorable.”

“That sounds adorable. I remember that they took to each other very quickly,” said Tyson. Of course, part of the reason he remembered that day so clearly was because he remembered seeing Jack and being struck by how beautiful he was. And now that he had the same man right in front of him, he remembered how dazzled he

felt, and it started happening all over again.

The date was going really well, that was for sure. He and Jack had chemistry, and he found the other man easy to talk to. He had thought that Jack would be shy, but he was able to converse just fine. In fact, he seemed more comfortable than he had been in all the previous times Tyson had seen him.

What would happen after the date? He didn't want to mess things up by taking it too fast. He had made that mistake before. His connection with Jack seemed really special, almost like Jack could be a life partner. He was at the age to be thinking of those things, and Jack did have a child. Maybe a simple first kiss would be just fine, even if his cock said otherwise.

When their meals arrived, they dug in, both extremely hungry. Tyson didn't drink often, so the one beer he had gave him a pleasant buzz that helped the conversation flow even more freely. They finished their meals quickly, almost like they wanted to get them out of the way so they could go back to talking.

When the check came, Tyson claimed it. Jack made an obligatory protest, but Tyson refused, smoothly telling him that he could get the next check. Jack smiled. So there would be a next time.

"You want to walk around for a little bit?" Tyson asked.

Jack checked his phone for the time. "Yeah, the babysitter will be there for another hour at least."

When they pushed the door to leave the restaurant, they bumped into each other, and Tyson stiffened at the physical contact. It was unexpected, and his body responded exactly as he would expect it to. His cock stiffened to the point where he was afraid there would be a tent in his crotch, and he immediately became a little sweaty out of nervousness.

But Jack seemed unperturbed. Maybe he hadn't been rattled like Tyson, or maybe he hid his reactions very well.

As they walked out onto the street, to the park, Tyson felt the urge to take Jack's hand. That was what you did on a date, after all. But the little voice in his head advised him not to. Something about Jack still seemed restrained, and Tyson was certain that if he tried to hold hands, it would ruin the comfortable rapport they had going.

He'd have to find another opportunity for more physical contact. But how could he do that without spooking Jack? That was the challenge.

Eighteen – Jack

Wow. This date was going a million times better than Jack had ever expected it to. He'd lusted after Tyson for a while. But it wasn't typical that the guy you had a crush on liked you back, *and* wanted to ask you out. It was like being in high school all over again, except this time, he was a winner.

The easy chemistry between them took him by surprise. The first obstacle was getting the date in the first place, but the second was finding out if they were compatible or not. It turned out that he and Tyson were. It wasn't typical that Jack found someone who made him feel so comfortable, but Tyson was that person. Maybe it was because he spent so much time around animals, and had developed a gentle, patient demeanor. Jack wasn't yet ready to open up further, but he could actually see himself doing so later on.

But it wasn't all perfect. Jack still felt self-conscious about being on a gay date. Redwood County was an accepting place, and he knew no one would give them any trouble. But the echo of his parents' voices resonated in his head, making him feel that he was doing something wrong.

It was obvious that Tyson felt a lot more comfortable in his own skin than Jack did. And he definitely felt a lot more comfortable about being a gay guy, like he had accepted it earlier in life, and had been supported from an early age. Of course, Jack wouldn't presume to know about Tyson's past, but the man's confidence was admirable and envy inducing.

So all in all, even though the date was going well, Jack felt apprehensive, knowing that if he *did* want to be in this relationship and if it *did* go well, he would eventually have to tell his parents about it. And that was something he was not ready to face.

Well, there was no point worrying about it now, anyway. He ought to just enjoy himself in the moment, instead of indulging his anxiety about the future. He took a deep breath, tuning back into the conversation.

"You okay?" asked Tyson. He laid a concerned hand on Jack's shoulder, causing Jack to stiffen a little bit at the unexpected contact. When Tyson realized this, he withdrew, and Jack felt a little guilty.

"I'm fine," said Jack, not willing to open up about his parents right now. He knew he was going to have a lot of feelings to process about the date when he got home.

They walked down the street, watching people as they mingled in the crowd, who had just finished their dinner or shopping trips. There was some jazz music, played by a saxophone, emanating from a

street corner; buskers were common here when the weather was nice. It added an extra romantic flair to the date. Jack wanted to enjoy himself, but the music just made him a little more uncomfortable.

As they walked, they ended up in the park where they had met the other day. It was now empty, the grass blue toned under the moonlight. Other groups of people or individuals were sitting on the grass, children playing and dogs barking. Some people sat on the edge of the fountain, having their own whispered conversations.

"You want to have a seat over there?" asked Tyson, pointing toward an empty space on the fountain's edge.

"That would be great," said Jack.

They sat down on the cold stone, the soothing sound of water falling behind them. The fountain wasn't one of those strange designs with dolphins and cherubs; it was relatively simple, which Jack liked. He looked into the water and saw what looked like thousands of pennies and other coins, nearly glowing when the light hit them.

They sat for a moment in silence, watching the crowds of people milling around. Jack thought he spotted a couple of his neighbors, but when he took a closer look, he had just been imagining it. Thank goodness. He wasn't even ready to come out to his neighbors yet.

So when would he feel comfortable being in a relationship with Tyson? They were grown men; it wasn't like in school where it was vaguely acceptable to ask someone to hide their identity for the sake of the parents and anyone else who might cause trouble. Adults had to stand strong on their own. They couldn't allow other peoples' shitty opinions to dictate their behavior.

Tyson placed his hand on Jack's thigh. It felt good. Almost too good. Jack was worried his cock was going to get hard enough to tent his crotch. But again, he stiffened under the unexpected contact. Tyson drew back, easily able to read his mood.

This was why he had been called frigid by the other guys he'd gotten with, way back when. They'd been douche bags, but they'd been right. He was frigid. He couldn't even handle another guy's hand on him. How in the world was he going to progress to kissing and touching, much less sex?

Tyson would never want to date him when he figured this out. A hot guy liked Tyson deserved someone who was willing to worship his body, give him all the pleasure he deserved—because Jack was sure a guy this kind and patient was excellent in bed.

He was worried that Tyson would become irritated, but instead, he was cool and collected. "You from around here?" he asked.

"Nah," said Jack, glad to have some conversation to think about, instead of his damned sexuality. "I lived in San Diego before

moving here, and I was from that general area anyway. I felt like I would fit in better up here."

"Has that turned out to be true so far?"

Jack smiled. "Yeah. I can keep to myself in a quiet neighborhood, and the weather isn't as brutally hot. And the redwood forests are incredible."

"That's absolutely true. They're almost the best thing about living here." Tyson laughed.

"Where are you from?" asked Jack.

"Well, I moved here as soon as I could leave my parents' house, just because I wanted to be independent, and I got my associate's at the community college here. They live right outside of San Francisco. Got priced out by the tech boom." He laughed harshly.

"I see," said Jack. He was intrigued. Why had Tyson felt compelled to leave his hometown so quickly? Was there something there that Jack could relate to? He didn't want to open a potential can of worms on a first date, so he let it go, but he filed it away for later reference. Maybe Tyson had more in common with him than he'd thought.

The conversation flowed easily from there; that part was simple, at least. But because he was sitting so close to Tyson, Jack's body was responding to the proximity in ways he couldn't control. His cock twitched whenever he focused too much on Tyson's body, and when he smiled that lovely smile… Jack could barely control himself.

But even though he was getting hornier as the night went on, a voice in his head—the voice of his parents—told him how abnormal it was to desire another man. Before meeting Tyson, he had been just fine with being gay—as long as he didn't actively desire anyone else, not like this. But now that he was falling head over heels for Tyson, the homophobic attitude was returning with full force, like his parents were trying to sabotage his happiness even now.

It didn't make him angry; it just made him feel numb. This was what his life was destined to be like. Forever. Maybe he ought to try going to therapy. But even the thought of working through it was daunting.

"I think I should head back," said Jack, checking his phone again. "The babysitter will be leaving soon, and I don't want to keep her too late."

"Of course," said Tyson.

They walked back down the street, discussing the area and stopping to comment on the various dogs they saw, and when they came to the street which led into Jack's neighborhood, they stopped, ready to part ways.

"I had an amazing time tonight," said Tyson, earnest. "I'd

really like to see you again." His eyes were soulful, the pale green looking extra intense in the limited light. Tyson's brown skin was also beautiful, and Jack longed to touch it.

"I did too," replied Jack sincerely, wanting to see Tyson again. "Maybe next week?"

"Yeah." Tyson seemed pleased by this answer, his mouth curving into a satisfied smile. "Let's do that."

"Awesome. I'll talk to you later. And please, keep me updated about the shelter," said Jack.

There was an expectant moment hanging in the air between them, a pregnant silence. They both hesitated. Then Tyson took his chin and kissed him, his lips soft and smooth. Jack nearly moaned; he'd forgotten how it felt.

When Jack didn't pull away, Tyson placed his hands on his face and pulled him even closer. Shit, were they going to make out right here, on the street? There weren't as many people down here, but still… It didn't matter, though. Lust had clearly overtaken both men, who had managed to stay away from each other for too long. Now that they were kissing, it was overwhelming.

Jack felt magnetically drawn to Tyson, and couldn't have pulled back even if he wanted to. He experimentally pressed his tongue against Tyson's lips, a thrill flooding through him when they parted, and then they were making out.

But he got spooked after a couple of seconds and drew back, breathless. Tyson's eyes glowed. "You're a good kisser," he said.

"Thanks," said Jack, overwhelmed. "You too."

"Next week then, for sure, yeah?"

"Definitely."

"Goodnight, Jack," said Tyson. He turned and waved a little before walking back down the street.

"Goodnight," said Jack, but he didn't think Tyson heard him. He stood there, paralyzed, watching Tyson walk away, until he remembered that he had to get back for Mia.

It was a ten minute walk back to his house, and when he got there, she was sleepy and ready to be put to bed. The babysitter was a local college student who'd come recommended through one of his neighbors; her sweet demeanor had won Jack over instantly. After saying goodbye to her and putting Mia—and Harold—to bed, Jack had some time to himself to think things through.

His body *still* felt the effects of the kiss. It was like being transported back to middle school, almost. Everything felt exciting again.

But he couldn't do this. He couldn't keep going until he sorted out his issues. It just wasn't fair to Tyson, who seemed so kind, so

earnest. So willing to respect Jack's boundaries, even when he didn't even state them. It just sucked that Jack didn't even want those boundaries to be there in the first place.

Maybe he *could* stand up to his parents if he really wanted to.

Or maybe not.

Nineteen – Tyson

Today was not going to be a good day.

It was time to finalize the list of animals who were to be transferred to the animal control shelter, and Tyson, unfortunately, was the one whose primary responsibility it was. Tina had offered to help him, but he felt like doing it alone.

It was the right decision, because he didn't want to end up crying in front of anyone else. He had to go down the rows of runs and cages with clipboard in hand, writing down the ID numbers of the dogs and cats who had to go.

He could barely handle it. As he diligently wrote down the correct information, they watched him. The dogs greeted him like an old friend, not knowing that he was practically sending them to their deaths. Their bright brown eyes and wagging tails showed their happiness at seeing him. They shouldn't have been happy at all, though. They should be resentful.

But dogs didn't do resentment like that. These dogs would still be smiling even as they were shipped off. They were completely innocent.

When he got to Bobsey's run, he had to take a deep breath and sit down for a moment, willing his eyes not to moisten further. He could not break down now, because if he did, then the tears would flow and flow. And he could tell everyone else was on the verge, too. If the manager starting crying, the waterworks would really start all over the shelter.

Bobsey could tell how upset he was, and the little dog hopped over to the door of the run and tried to press up against it, wanting to be close to him. Tyson extended his hand so the dog could lick it, feeling undeserving of Bobsey's love. This was one of the dogs who wouldn't make it. Despite his cute, teddy bear-like face, no one wanted to adopt Bobsey because he only had three legs.

It was so unfair.

He opened the run and let Bobsey flow into his arms. The dog immediately reared up and started licking Tyson's face, melting into his lap like he was made to be there. Tyson blinked back tears as he buried his face in the dog's fur, enjoying the softness and warmth. Bobsey was like a real life plush toy.

"I love you too, buddy," he said quietly.

He was reluctant to peel himself away, not only because Bobsey was so loving, but because he didn't want to get to Leah's cage. He knew it was inevitable, but that didn't stop him from wanting to put it off as long as possible. Today was already a shitty

day, so why make it even worse?

But Leah was in the same row of runs, and he had to get this list done before lunch. He put Bobsey back and watched the dog, who wagged his tail heartily as the door closed, glad to have gotten some cuddles.

Tyson had to suck it up and get it over with. Postponing putting Leah on the list wasn't going to save her. He strode over to the run and opened it, and Leah immediately walked out calmly. He sat on the floor and she walked up to his face. Somehow, her expression gave the sense that she knew exactly what was going on. She licked his cheek gently, her breath humid against his ear, and rested her head on his shoulder.

Tyson couldn't handle it anymore. He began bawling, like he hadn't cried in a decade and was letting it all out. No one was going to see him in here, as they'd just finished taking the dogs out, and he clearly needed it, because the tears flowed and flowed. Leah stood there patiently, her silky fur tickling his face, and her Labrador body solid and comforting.

After a few minutes, the tears ran out and he pulled back. Leah tilted her head slightly and gazed into his eyes, and he nearly started crying again when she gently licked away his tears.

"I love you so much, honey," he said, kissing Leah on the forehead. Immensely reluctant, he stood up and led her back into the run, loathe to continue the odious task of writing down these dogs' names and numbers.

Crying had been cathartic, though. He was glad it had happened, because now, he felt a little refreshed, like the concentrated emotions of the past few weeks had been exorcised, and he was free to move forward. Not that it would be easy—how could it, when he was going to miss these animals terribly? But it would be more manageable than it was.

It wasn't like this was the only time the job had a tragic aspect. After all, they did have to euthanize animals who were so old that they had quality of life issues, or animals who were so sick or injured that it would be far too painful or expensive, unfortunately, for them to keep going. But these dogs and cats had minor health issues or disabilities, and were still capable of living full, happy lives.

Tyson was almost wondering whether he'd have to see a therapist over this when Jack texted him, simply asking how his day was going. After the emotional hangover from crying with Leah, Tyson didn't know how to respond. But he managed to type it out: *Mediocre day. Have to prep the animals who have to be transferred*.

Sorry to hear that, wrote Jack.

Tyson hadn't given him much to work with. It was a bad day

overall, and he wasn't really in the mood to have a positive conversation. Instead of saying more, he decided to just send Jack photos of the dogs. He spent a minute making pictures of Leah, Bobsey, and his other favorites and sending them to Jack. Pictures would suffice when words couldn't.

Damn, they're just too adorable, said Jack.

Yeah. Bobsey's the three-legged guy, and Leah's the Lab mix, wrote Tyson. He sighed and checked the time. He still had a couple more hours to kill before he could go home, and anyway, there was still so much he had to do. He just didn't want to do it.

Tyson decided to do something therapeutic instead—cleaning. Doing the laundry and dishes was always relaxing in a way, probably because it just felt good to make things become clean again. There was always work to be done in that regard, so he headed to the laundry room and checked the dryer, taking the load out and folding the towels. He inhaled the fresh scent and relaxed a little. In here, without the sounds of people talking and dogs barking, he could think a little easier.

The shelter had really given his life meaning. That hadn't really occurred to Tyson before today; he'd never been *so* emotional about the animals until their lives were in danger. He lived, breathed, and slept the shelter. It wasn't a bad thing, certainly, but ultimately, it was work. It was something he did in exchange for a paycheck. And any human, no matter how awesome their job was, needed something more than that, especially when their job was emotionally draining.

Most of the other shelter staff had partners they could go home to, people who would help them unwind at the end of the day. Or they'd have families, children who needed to be made dinner and helped with homework. They had other major responsibilities outside of their jobs. Tyson didn't have anything like that. He didn't even have his own dog, after all.

Having a partner would bring balance to his life. It seemed like Jack had more going on than he did, with Mia, but it seemed like he was sort of the same way. Jack appeared to be the type to become engrossed in his work, and Tyson wouldn't have been surprised if he found out he was like that before adopting Mia. Maybe bringing her into his life was a way of balancing his responsibilities.

And maybe it was a way of bringing him out of his shell. Tyson pondered this thought as he stretched his legs, feeling the burn in his hamstrings. He'd run around quite a bit in the dog park this morning—the pups had been energetic—and he hadn't had time to stretch afterward like he should have.

He was on to something with the thought of Jack being in a shell. The man obviously was, though it was hard to say why. Maybe

Tyson could help draw him out, like Harold was doing for Mia. Maybe they both needed partners for different variations of the same reason: balance.

After all, wasn't that why anyone got a partner—to emphasize the parts of themselves that were good and improve the parts that needed improving? And couldn't a partner heal the parts of yourself that you thought were beyond repair?

Tyson knew he had parts like that, but what were Jack's? Maybe he had some internalized homophobia, instilled by parents or bullies in school. Maybe he'd consumed messages that had made him feel like being gay was bad. Maybe it was religion… Or even all of these factors, combined.

It had to be something like that. Jack was just so stiff in his physical interactions, like he wasn't fully comfortable being intimate with another man. Tyson had also observed how he had seemed uncomfortable in his own skin when they were together, like he was afraid that people would think they were a couple—which was silly, because they *had* been on a date.

That anti-bullying initiative sure would be helpful. But Tyson had to remain firm. He couldn't take away from the dogs, especially when he was still reeling from his crying episode earlier. There had to be other ways to help kids. Maybe guidance counselors could just do a better job? There were online resources for that kind of thing.

He shook his head, trying to get off that train of thought, and started putting the folded piles of towels and blankets away. He had given himself a lot to think about, especially about relationship dynamics. His life was usually so busy that he didn't have the time or energy to have contemplative moments like these.

He'd have to do the laundry more often, it seemed like.

Twenty – Jack

The photos Tyson had sent were heart-meltingly adorable, but Jack felt uneasy because he knew these were the dogs who were on the contingency plan list. He tried to put the thought out of his mind; there was nothing he could do about it until the Bornhill Foundation folks got back to him. And he was glad, anyway, that Tyson was still texting him after that awkward first date.

He finished the browser tab he was using to research schools for Mia—he was debating whether or not to keep her in public school or send her to private school for the upcoming school year. Because it was early summer, he didn't have that long to decide. Maybe he could just ask her. But then, if she was overwhelmed with picking out clothes, how could she decide which school to go to?

His phone rang and he picked it up, recognizing the number as one of Bornhill's extensions, but one he didn't recognize.

"Jack Keppel?"

"That's me," said Jack.

"Oh, it's Jason Rudren. I just wanted to let you know that we've decided to accept the Redwood County Animal Shelter for our grant program. Congrats!"

Jack was silent, processing the news. Had he really heard what he thought he'd heard? There was no way he could actually have come across a stroke of luck like this.

"That's—that's amazing, thank you, Jason," said Jack.

"No problem. We'll be emailing you the paperwork so you can forward it to your contact at the shelter. Now that the application has been processed, it'll take about thirty days for the shelter to get the funds."

Jack turned the number over in his head. It would be a couple weeks into the fiscal year, so they'd have to cover the gap until then, but still. This was better than anyone was expecting. They wouldn't have to send the animals to the other shelter. Bornhill had come through in the nick of time.

"Sounds good, Jason," said Jack, itching to start reading the documents.

"Just let me know if you have any other questions," said Jason.

After he hung up, Jack immediately rushed to open his email, downloading the paperwork and poring through it. But his heart sank when he came to the section that detailed the grant amount. It was only half of what the shelter needed to cover the shortfall, and Jack didn't know if it would be enough to cover all the operating expenses. He had contacted one of the board members for help with the

application, so he could surprise Tyson with it if it went through, but she hadn't told him enough for him to determine how useful this money would be.

Fuck. Did that mean that the dogs Tyson loved were going to get sent away after all? Jack was grateful that they'd decided to give the shelter the grant, because surely some money would be far better than none, but still…

Well, he'd have to move forward with this anyway. It wasn't up to him anymore—he'd done the best he could. Now, at least he could bring some bit of good news to Tyson.

Mia and Harold were spending the day with Jack's sister. He got to see her only about once a month, because she lived in the next county over, but Mia had adored her as soon as they'd met. Jack hadn't really figured that one out yet. He knew Mia was probably awkward around him because he was a man, so maybe she liked Julia because she was a woman. Or maybe she just liked Julia's colorful sense of style. Or the way Julia always brought her sweet treats. There was a lot to like about Julia.

He was supposed to meet up with them for lunch, so he had time to pop over to the shelter and see if Tyson was there. Emboldened by this idea, he grabbed his wallet and keys and drove to the shelter, thrilled by the prospect of seeing Tyson again. Just envisioning those gorgeous green eyes sent a flutter through his heart, and the smile that would appear on Tyson's face when Jack told him about the Bornhill grant…

He strode into the shelter and saw that a familiar woman with blonde hair in a ponytail was sitting at the front desk—Tina. When she looked up and saw him, a sly smile crossed her face.

"Is Tyson here?" asked Jack.

"Yeah, he's in today." She turned and hollered down the main corridor. "*Tyson!*"

Within seconds, Tyson's face appeared around the corner, and he was exasperated. "What's the matter, Tina… Oh. Hey, Jack." He smiled.

"Hey. Do you have a moment?" Jack smiled to show that he wasn't bringing bad news.

"Sure. Come on back with me."

He followed Tyson toward the back of the shelter, passing by the cat cages and small animal room.

"So what did you want to talk to me about?" asked Tyson, pausing outside of a row of runs.

"Um, so… I submitted a grant application to my company's charitable giving foundation a while back, and they got back to me…"

Tyson's eyes widened. "What?"

“So they’re willing to cover half of the shortfall. I know it’s not the full amount, but maybe it’ll mean the dogs won’t have to get sent away. I don’t know how these things work—”

Tyson cut him off by throwing his arms around him and kissing him on the lips with a sudden burst of emotion. The man’s muscular arms squeezed him, and startled, Jack stood there frozen until he remembered to hug him back.

“Holy shit,” said Tyson. “Are you serious?”

“Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I talked to Tess, from the board, and she helped with the application details. I figured it would be a good surprise…”

Tyson shook his head slowly, amazed. “You did all that? Wow.”

Jack flushed, heat spreading across his cheeks. “Least I could do, you know. Figured it was worth a shot.”

“Thank you, Jack. That really means a lot.” He leaned forward and kissed Jack on the cheek sweetly. “I have some good news, too.”

“Oh really?”

“The board is now trying to get a hearing with the county officials, and we’re circulating a petition. We were too surprised to be organized at the town hall meeting, but now we’re prepared.” Tyson’s eyes glowed.

But Jack found that he couldn’t match Tyson’s enthusiasm. “That’s awesome,” he said, trying to convince himself that it was. But was it a good idea to take money away from the anti-bullying initiative? Especially when the Bornhill Foundation grant would be a huge help? After all, Tyson had mentioned that only part of the shortfall was for operating expenses. The rest was for extra projects… wasn’t it?

“I’ll let you know when that is, if you can make it,” said Tyson.

“I’ll definitely try.” Jack nodded. “But um, what about the anti-bullying initiative?”

Shit, why had he said that? He could have left and everything would have been just fine. But now he had to open up this can of worms.

“What about it?” Tyson furrowed his brow.

“I mean… if the Bornhill Foundation grant covers the shelter’s operating expenses, do you also need the money for the extra projects?”

Ugh, why was he digging himself into this hole further?

“I don’t know if the grant will cover the operating expenses,” said Tyson, his voice calm. “I mean, I hadn’t even heard of it until now.”

Jack still wasn’t convinced, but he felt stupid bringing it up. Of

course Tyson wouldn't know. He sheepishly looked away, catching the eye of a grim-looking Shih Tzu mix.

"Um, yeah, forget I said anything. I just feel torn, you know?"

Tyson's expression softened, but he was still cool toward Jack when he spoke. "I know. But my loyalty is with the shelter."

"Right, yeah, sure," said Jack. He forced himself to look into Tyson's eyes again.

"So just let me know if you want to come to the hearing, and thanks again for the grant. Really."

"Sure." Jack smiled, but he was nervous for having rocked the boat. As much as he wanted to stay in Tyson's presence, he also wanted to leave.

"Bye, Jack!"

"See you."

He turned and walked back down the corridor. What had just happened? He hadn't made Tyson mad, had he? Surely, Tyson understood that he couldn't just be loyal to the shelter, especially when both causes were near and dear to him.

Maybe he wouldn't even have to worry about bringing Tyson home to meet his parents, if he couldn't stop saying stupid things. It was all a moot point, and it was so hard for him to know where he stood.

Or maybe it was partially in his head. He remembered something a counselor in college had told him. When he told her about how his parents had treated him, she'd asked him to think about how they had affected the way he interacted with other people.

He'd always been worried about upsetting his parents, because the punishment for that was withdrawal of affection. Of course, they weren't particularly affectionate to begin with, and Thanksgiving and Christmas were chilly affairs to sit through. But as a child, he had been sensitive to these variances, and he'd received the message early on that if he displeased them in any way, he'd pay for it.

In his conversations with the counselor, he'd figured out that he simply expected everyone else important in his life to treat him the same way. It wasn't surprising to him that it was a recurring pattern. The result was that he could be oversensitive to what people thought of him. Not everyone—certainly not his coworkers, whose opinion he cared little about. But only people who truly mattered to him, like friends, family, and potential romantic partners.

He had to look at the facts. Tyson was a kind man and by all accounts, levelheaded and reasonable. He wasn't like Jack's parents. For one thing, he didn't have that icy demeanor. They were still getting to know each other, but that much was clear. Jack just had to get over himself and realize that Tyson deserved the benefit of the

doubt.

And even if it was difficult, Jack had to give it to him.

Twenty-One – Tyson

To Tyson's complete and utter surprise, it had been Jack who had initiated the next date.

After Jack had come in to the shelter to tell Tyson about the Bornhill Foundation grant—for which he truly was grateful—they had been in contact to discuss the details and see how far the grant would go. But the fact that Jack was torn over supporting the hearing and petition hung over them like a miasma.

Tyson wanted to forgive him, and knew it was foolish to hold it against him. When he'd gone home that night, he'd groaned in frustration with himself, asking why he couldn't just let it go so he could pursue the relationship. But when the issue at hand was so personal, it was difficult to *feel* any other way.

It turned out that grant money was going to cover most of the operating expenses, but not all of it. Tyson had seen the disappointment on Jack's face—disappointment that shouldn't have been there, when he'd gone to all the effort of getting the grant. But ultimately, everyone at the shelter knew that two peoples' jobs were at stake, as well as nearly twenty animals.

The board had decided to prioritize the salaries of the new employees. Tyson had had to call on the sense of inner calm he'd developed, working with the animals. Of course they needed to have these jobs; Redwood County was dotted with small towns, and good jobs weren't common, especially for people who didn't have a lot of higher education. And like most other nonprofit workers, they didn't make that much in the first place, so they didn't have a lot in savings. If they lost their jobs, quite frankly, they'd be fucked.

Keeping these jobs was the right thing to do. But Tyson's heart still broke for the animals. He wasn't alone in that regard, but sometimes, it felt like he was the only one who felt the pain viscerally, understanding the existential terror the animals would face if they knew what was going on. It didn't help that he knew he was going to have a hard time getting over it, even after they were transferred. He'd have to resist finding out what had happened to them. Or he would, and then he'd go through the pain all over again.

These were the feelings he'd been struggling with recently: trying to feel grateful in the face of a tragic situation, and trying to forgive when he was almost blinded by pain. So when Jack had casually asked him about going to a festival downtown, he'd been surprised; his mind had been so focused on the shelter's issues recently that he'd forgotten about himself. And a date with Jack was just the chance to return to that.

It was also surprising because Jack had seemed so reserved and restrained. Tyson hadn't thought he would gather up the nerve to ask him out. Jack seemed like he wanted to date another man, but was held back from pursuing it himself.

Good for him.

They'd agreed to meet near the fountain, which was going to be the center of the Redwood County Jazz Festival. This annual event was one of Tyson's favorites; if Jack hadn't asked him out, he probably would have decided to go anyway. And best of all, it was free, supported by the various vendors who tabled there.

He stepped out of his car and smiled, the cheerful, smooth strains of a jazz band already floating down to this end of the street. The festival had actually started in the afternoon, but there would be bands playing all night. Food trucks would be present for dinner, serving all kinds of entrees and desserts.

Unsurprisingly, it was very crowded. There were still some families with children around, though most of them would have come during the daytime, when there were more family-friendly activities. Now, the drinks came out—a few blocks were cordoned off as a "beer garden" so people could consume alcohol outside—and Redwood County saw more nightlife than it did all month.

The band's stage was facing the beer garden, and behind it was the fountain. Tyson strolled past the stage, noting the snazzy maroon silk suits of the band members, who were totally engrossed in playing. It'd be nice to be a musician. Tyson had never so much as touched a musical instrument, and he'd always wanted to, though he had no idea what he'd play.

Jack was sitting at the edge of the fountain, staring at his phone. This time, he was particularly well-dressed, with what looked like a fancy button down—fancier than any Tyson owned, though he'd done his best—and dark jeans. Tyson couldn't help but notice how Jack's muscles were perfectly outlined, yet hidden by the fit of the jeans. He made a mental note to ask Jack for fashion help, if he ever needed it. The surfer image was gone, replaced with someone far more suave.

"Hey," said Tyson, and Jack looked up, smiling tentatively.

Tyson took a seat next to Jack, sitting close enough that they were almost touching. There was something about this night. He couldn't put his finger on it, but between Jack's newfound confidence, the sensual atmosphere of the jazz festival, and the beautiful evening weather, it seemed like tonight would be special.

"Isn't the band amazing?" asked Jack. "I've been listening to most of their set, and they were so good. I keep forgetting how much I like jazz music, and then I run into something like this and remember

all over again."

"Oh man," said Tyson. "I love jazz. But you're right, I always forget to put it on. You know, the area does have a jazz and classical station."

"Right, yeah. 107.1, The Spice, or whatever it's called. They're a sponsor." Jack laughed. "It's funny how radio stations are still doing so well."

Even though they were behind the stage, they had a good view because the fountain was higher up than the street. They were at the same level as the musicians themselves and could see the crowd of people watching from the beer garden area.

"Thanks for asking me to this, by the way," said Tyson. "It's a good date idea."

Jack flushed, his cheeks coloring. "I figured it was my turn. I couldn't let you take me out twice in a row. Fair's fair."

Tyson laughed. It was like much of the tension from their previous encounter had disappeared. Somehow, with Jack taking the lead this time, he'd been able to let go of the anger and negativity that had stuck to him. If this was what having a life outside the shelter was like… He'd been going without for far too long.

"Jack," said Tyson, wondering if he should ask. "I have to be honest. I thought you wouldn't want to ask me out again because you were, I don't know, a little embarrassed about being gay? I feel silly admitting it now, but it was just the vibe I got. Something like it, anyway."

Jack's eyes widened. Shit, had Tyson hit a nerve? But Jack didn't look worried or afraid; he just looked impressed.

"Wow, you could tell? Am I that obvious? Or are you just crazy good at reading people?" He raised an eyebrow.

"A little bit of both, maybe. I dunno, there was just something a little restrained about you in all of our interactions. I had a hunch you were gay early on, but it's not often that I meet gay guys who seem like they have that kind of internal conflict," said Tyson. He shrugged. "I guess my hunch was right."

"You should be a therapist or something, honestly. It's impressive," said Jack. "But yeah. You're not wrong. It's just the legacy of my parents. Religious parents. They beat me over the head with anti-gay shit growing up."

"Ah." Tyson allowed himself to celebrate his triumph. He *had* been right. Maybe Jack was on to something, with the therapist comment. "That's rough."

"Yeah. I mean, I know I'm gay and I accept it. But sometimes it's hard to do what I want to do when I still hear their voices in the back of my head."

Tyson had honestly been thinking he might have sex tonight. But now, he realized that it might not happen so fast. Jack probably had some stuff to work through before he felt confident enough to have *gay sex*, of all things. And Tyson was happy to wait. Sex was awesome, and of course, his libido was running wild, being so close to Jack, who smelled and looked delicious. But for the right guy, he'd be patient.

"Anyway, how were your parents?" asked Jack.

"Oh, um…" He'd caught Tyson by surprise. "They were okay. Never really against being gay, but never super supportive either. They just sort of let me do my own thing, and they seemed like they'd had me because they felt they were supposed to."

"Supposed to?"

"Yeah, you know, people who think kids are the next box to check off in a list that includes getting a career and buying a house. They didn't really think through their decision. And they treated me fine, but we also weren't really well-off, so…"

"Shame," said Jack, frowning. "And to think I had to write an essay about why I should get Mia, when other people can have a kid whenever they want."

"And they even get pregnant by accident. It's just so insane to think about. Like, how does that happen. If pregnancy was a concern for me, I'd be too scared to have sex," said Tyson, shaking his head.

"Have you thought about having kids?" asked Jack.

"Oh yeah, I figured they'd happen after I got the partner, job, and house thing down. But none of that has happened yet. Except the job, I guess, but it doesn't pay that well." Tyson sighed. "I mean, I'd like a kid. Or two."

"It's definitely a good choice. I love having Mia around. And I love being the parent that my parents never were. She's a darling, and she and Harold… They are too cute." Jack smiled, looking off into the distance, like he was thinking about what she was doing at that very moment.

"You got a babysitter for the night?" asked Tyson.

"No, she's actually with my sister again. They loved each other when they met, and it's good for her to have an adult woman as a role model, anyway. And the whole thing has brought me and Julia closer together." Jack turned back to Tyson. "I think you'd like her."

"If she's as kind as you, then yeah, I think I would." Tyson smiled, then leaned forward and kissed Jack on the cheek.

Jack blushed again, making Tyson's heart flutter. It was wonderful to see how he had this effect on someone else. And of course, Jack would have that effect on him too, whenever he became more comfortable with physical affection.

Though… If Mia was with her aunt for the weekend, that meant that Jack had the house to himself. Maybe Jack wasn't there yet, and Tyson doubted he'd invite him over. But a guy could dream, and at the very inkling that something had the slightest chance of happening, Tyson's cock twitched, coming to life.

It was like he'd thought. Something about this night just put him in the mood. The emotional intimacy that had burgeoned with them talking about their families had definitely helped.

"Wanna walk down the street a bit?" asked Jack.

"Sure."

Tyson got up first and extended a hand to help Jack up. The other man's hand was warm and dry, perfect for holding. But Tyson wasn't going to push him. He was going to let him go at his own pace.

They went down to the stage and watched the next band for a little bit, Jack buying beers for both of them. By now, the alcohol flowed more freely and more people were dancing in the beer garden's central area, smooth, sensual music provided by the band. A petite woman belted out strong notes in French, and Tyson couldn't help but take Jack's hand, bolstered by the buzz from his drink.

To his surprise, Jack didn't recoil or withdraw at all. Instead, he turned to Tyson and smiled a little. He'd gone back into his shell a little bit with the physical contact, but he was clearly trying. Tyson's libido was roused, as his brain started feeding him fantasies of *something* happening tonight.

They had a couple more drinks over the course of the set, which was long and engrossing. Neither wanted to leave the lovely bubble that they'd created, surrounded by festive people, profoundly romantic music, and the tenuous connection they'd forged.

"We're such lightweights," said Tyson jokingly. "Three beers, and I'm well into tipsy."

"Yeah, I don't drink much," said Jack, finishing the rest of his drink with the gusto reserved for those who were already inebriated. "But when I do… Oh man."

Maybe it was just because he'd had those beers, but Tyson was now convinced that he was going to get an invitation back to Jack's house—all the factors were too perfectly aligned. It just had to happen. But he watched Jack's behavior with fascination, wondering how he was going to suggest it.

And when he did, Tyson felt like a butterfly breaking out of his chrysalis, like he'd broken through to a new plane of awareness. He was going to have sex with Jack. He was going to break a years-long dry spell. Nerves flooded him as he realized that he almost didn't remember how to have sex. Nah. He'd know. And he didn't think Jack had had much action in the past few years either.

"You wanna go somewhere quieter?" asked Jack. His eyes were narrowed, like he was trying to be suave, but Tyson saw the uncertainty in his eyes.

"Of course."

When they turned the street into Jack's neighborhood, it practically became a different world. The suburban enclave was quiet and majestic, houses towering around them. Tyson had known Jack was wealthy from the adoption application but shit, he really did make a lot of money.

They walked up his driveway and Tyson's heart beat faster, realizing he was going inside his crush's house. His inner teenager was howling with delight, realizing what an opportunity this was. It was just as exciting as it had been back then.

The house was pin drop silent, though Harold barked when he saw them, trotting up happily and swarming around Tyson's feet with a questioning expression on his face, as if asking *what are you doing here?*

"All right, Harold, time for your crate," said Jack, kneeling down and hugging the dog, giving him some attention before putting him to bed for the night. The dog followed him upstairs. Was the crate in his bedroom, Tyson wondered. No, it probably was in Mia's room. Jack came back down shortly after.

"Now that Harold's out of our hair…" said Jack, sitting on the couch.

Tyson followed him; now it was his turn to be overwhelmed. He had no idea what had come over Jack—was it just the alcohol? And his house was magnificent. The TV was one of the biggest he'd ever seen in his life, and it looked like he actually had beer taps in the kitchen. It would be great for entertaining or throwing parties, but Tyson got the sense that Jack didn't do much of that.

He curled up on the couch next to Jack, feeling shy. How the situation had reversed, he marveled. Now Jack was the one in charge, while he followed along wonderingly.

But now that he'd got Tyson into his house, Jack seemed a little nervous. Having gotten this far seemed to be the limit of what he could do. He hesitated in getting any closer to Tyson, and Tyson could detect how nervous he was, from his posture and his tight face. Oh, he wanted this, all right, but he couldn't carry it through.

But that was okay. Tyson could handle part two just fine.

Twenty-Two – Jack

Alarm bells were practically going off in Jack's head. How in the world had this happened? One moment, he was sitting on the edge of the fountain, waiting for Tyson to show up, and suddenly, Tyson was in his house, and they were tipsy, and his cock was getting hard, and he was getting crushed by the weight of expectation.

Breathe, Jack. Just breathe. He could do this. He just had to go with the flow. Right. Yeah. Go with the flow. Tyson seemed a little more confident than he did, albeit dazzled by the house—something that made Jack feel a little embarrassed. He did have a nice house, but did he have to make it so fancy? He hadn't even thought about what it would look like to someone else, fuck…

The thoughts scattered like dandelion seeds when Tyson kissed him, warm lips pressed together, hands pressed against his chest. Oh, God. Jack took deep breaths, trying to coordinate all the things he was trying to do. He rubbed Tyson's smooth chin, took in the scent of his deodorant and natural musk, felt his cock, well, both of their cocks, harden. Things were going fast. Really fast.

It was like he'd been walking on the side of the train tracks, and now, he'd managed to hop on the freight train. It was hard to balance and find a place to settle down, a rhythm, while the train just kept moving forward. It didn't help that his brain was making things muddy.

But as Tyson started making out with him, Jack relaxed, finding that rhythm. Making out was easy; he could do this. His tongue found Tyson's, and they danced together, echoing the vibe they'd felt earlier with the music. Jack could practically still hear it, trying to remember how he'd felt—easy, carefree, limber.

He could be that. But then, Tyson pulled away and started working down his neck. "Oh, man," said Jack.

Tyson pulled away to look at him with narrowed eyes, a smile playing about his lips. "You like it?"

"Yeah," said Jack, a little weakly. "Why'd you stop?"

Tyson laughed and went back to kissing his neck, working his way even further down to Jack's collarbone. His hands held Jack to him, and Jack was leaning back, practically melting into the couch as Tyson insistently worked at him. His cock was straining under his pants, and he desperately needed it to be free, so without even really thinking about it, he reached down to unzip his pants.

God, that felt good, finally giving it the room it needed to get harder. He was practically fully erect, and as Tyson pressed his weight on top of him, he felt his balls tightening, an orgasm already starting

to creep up on him.

Shit, he should have jacked off before this date. But then, he'd had no idea this was going to be how he ended the night. It just sort of… happened. And as he got more comfortable, he felt his anxiety drift away.

Man, he never lived like this—in the moment. Even though he dressed like an athletic person, well aware that he had a surfer dude look, he did nothing more than go to the gym. He didn't ever do anything that took him out of his head, not like this… There was nothing like sex to make you fully aware of your body.

All the sensations running through him were intoxicating, and he started stroking himself, feeling Tyson's cock pressing through his jeans. Oh. He needed to work on Tyson. He needed to see Tyson's cock, take it in his mouth…

Tyson unbuttoned Jack's shirt and removed it, slipping it off of him smoothly, then easily taking off his undershirt. Now Jack was almost naked, and Tyson still had all his clothes on. That wouldn't do. He stopped what he was doing with his cock and pushed Tyson a little so they were both sitting up on the couch, reaching over to undress his partner.

It was like he was unwrapping a gift. Was there anything better than undressing a hot guy? He was going to come in his pants right then and there if he didn't get a hold of himself. As he unbuttoned Tyson's shirt and removed it, he saw Tyson's thick biceps and defined pecs. Wow. He was even buffer than Jack had imagined.

Wow.

"You have a great body," he said simply, eyes wide.

"You too," said Tyson. "I can't wait to feel those muscles…"

Tyson went back to kissing down Jack's chest, working his way to his abs, which were tight under his lips, and even further, to the base of his cock. Jack moaned, spreading his legs instinctively, and watched as Tyson unzipped his own pants and worked his cock.

"Now, this is what a man like you deserves," said Tyson, licking up Jack's shaft and fondling his balls gently with his other hand.

Holy *shit*. That was the best thing Jack had ever felt. Ever. Damn. But the pleasure was still increasing as Tyson increased the speed and pressure on Jack's shaft, taking the head into his mouth and swirling his tongue around it, around and over all the most sensitive spots, like the base of his head and the part where it connected to the shaft. Even the little slit at the end was the target of the tip of Tyson's tongue, and Jack writhed on the couch, his body overwhelmed.

He felt like he was a teenager again, getting his first blow job. That was just how exciting it was. It felt illicit, almost, simply because

it felt so good, better than his body had a right to feel. But no. That was the past talking. Jack was allowed to feel as good as he wanted.

There should be no limits to pleasure.

He reached down and kneaded the muscles around Tyson's neck and shoulders, luxuriating in the fact that he had a hot guy working his cock. This was his fantasy come to life. And better than that, Tyson was a hot guy he had a crush on.

Tyson started falling into a rhythm, bobbing up and down on Jack's cock and fondling his balls. He even fingered the edge of the tight ring of muscle further back. Jack's entrance clenched as Tyson pushed him further toward an orgasm. He almost felt lightheaded as he reached his climax, and when Tyson pushed his finger in all the way and pressed his prostate…

"Oh, God," cried Jack, his head falling back, his eyes shutting tight.

He came, shuddering against Tyson's shoulders, grabbing on to the upholstery of the couch and clawing at it tightly, the reverberations of the orgasm passing through him. His body tightened and let go, feeling loose, supple. It was like being electrocuted, the powerful sensations flowing through his veins.

"God, that was good," said Jack, panting. "Wow."

"Yeah?" asked Tyson, looking up, a smug smile on his face.

"Oh, yeah. I have to return the favor."

Tyson laughed and sat up on the couch, leaning back as Jack bent over his cock. It was like the orgasmic energy had completely washed away how nervous Jack had felt. How had he ever been ashamed to be gay, or even restrained himself? This was the best thing *ever*. Being blown by another guy… Why had he ever thought he should avoid it, and how had he lived without it?

And now he had a beautiful, thick cock in front of him, hard and dripping precome and waiting for his mouth. Jack bent down and started licking, mirroring the same techniques Tyson had used. After all, they had felt great. He remembered to use his hands, too, stroking Tyson's inner thighs and making him twitch with those sparks of pleasure.

He kissed all around the base of Tyson's cock, teasing him. That was something he liked, he realized. Watching a man squirming under him, waiting for his touch, aching for release… It drove him wild in a way few other things did. So he worked his way slowly up Tyson's shaft, planting small kisses along it, and then long, languorous licks. He slowly fondled Tyson's balls, adding pleasure and layering it delicately.

"You're just too good, too," said Tyson breathlessly. He stretched his arms out, moaning a little when Jack started to lick

around his head.

Jack was thrilled to know he was doing a good job; he'd been slightly worried he'd come across like he had no idea what he was doing. Bolstered by the compliment, he increased his tempo, getting excited by the idea of keeping Tyson on the edge, then watching him explode, tasting his orgasm…

Just thinking of it was making Jack hard again, raring for round two.

But he had to be patient. He increased his pace and kept the rhythm steady, intending to build Tyson up, using the tip of his tongue to trace intricate patterns around the head. He made sure to use as much saliva as possible, making it easier for him to go smoothly up and down, up and down.

Tyson's hips started to instinctively buck against him, driving his cock a little deeper into his mouth, so Jack tried his best to take more of him, the head hitting the back of his throat. Tyson's moans were his reward, so he kept doing it, desperately wanting to feel his hot ropes of come and taste his pleasure.

When Tyson's moaning turned to groans, Jack knew the man was close, so he slowed down just a little bit, knowing from his own experiments that it would make the inevitable conclusion that much more explosive. Tyson's brows were furrowed, his mouth twisted into a grimace, and when Jack went back to his original pace, he came with a long, deep moan that sent a chill down Jack's spine.

His come was hot and spurts of it shot down Jack's throat. Jack slowed down his pace, watching Tyson shudder as the last of the pleasure flowed through him. When his green eyes opened, Tyson looked like he was surprised.

"I'd forgotten how awesome blow jobs were," he said.

"Me too," agreed Jack. "Seriously."

"We've gotta do this more often. Like, wow."

Jack laughed and stood up, stretching his limbs so they wouldn't get tight. The living room was a spontaneous place to have sex, but it wasn't necessarily the most comfortable.

He picked up his clothes and handed the rest back to Tyson, slipping his own undershirt and boxers back on. "You want some water?" he asked.

Tyson nodded, so Jack went to the kitchen and got two glasses of ice water. That was just what he needed. Between the coldness and the orgasm, he felt more clear-headed, if a little buzzed.

He sat down on the couch next to Tyson, and they downed their water in silence, Adam's apples bobbing as they took long drinks.

Jack was still amazed at just how incredible that had been. And to think he had been scared of being seen as gay, scared of

introducing a partner to his parents… This was what made life worth living. Not just the sexual pleasure, which was damn good, but also connecting with another man like this, a man who he'd shared emotional intimacy with and developed feelings for.

He hadn't even known what he was missing. And it had taken Tyson to help him realize that he wasn't frigid. It was like he just needed the right person to unlock his sexuality, set him free. He thought that would be cliché, but it wasn't. It reflected how he felt right now. Tyson had been the right person—trustworthy, passionate, respectful.

He turned to look at the man sitting next to him. "I'll go to the hearing," said Jack.

"Really?"

"Yeah, of course. I can't imagine not supporting you."

Tyson smiled, then leaned over and kissed Jack on the cheek. "Thank you, Jack."

"No, thank *you*," said Jack.

Tyson couldn't know everything he had done for Jack. He had changed Jack's life so much, and this was just the beginning.

Twenty-Three – Tyson

This hearing absolutely had to work so they could keep the animals. Tyson had long ago given up the idea of getting money for the extra projects; now, everyone's goal was just on covering that damn shortfall. If only they could do that, they'd be golden.

"Welcome, Redwood County Shelter staff," said Gareth, Tony's boss. Tyson hadn't known who any of these people were, so he'd looked them up on the government's website.

"Thank you," said Sandra, looking posh in her new pantsuit. It was an optimistic shade of rose pink.

"Come on in, everyone. Have a seat in the rows behind the board's seats," continued Gareth. "We'll have the board members speak on the shelter's behalf, then have the petition presented. Thank you for your presence today."

They were meeting at the local government's office complex. It looked imposing, with all the employees running around everywhere and the sprawling parking lot. Tyson hadn't wanted to come, honestly, because it was just the board who was going to speak. But he'd felt obligated to.

And best of all, Jack had come with him. Tyson had tried to reassure him multiple times that he didn't have to. The closeness they'd enjoyed while sleeping together seemed to have flipped a switch in Jack, making him almost like a boyfriend. Of course, that was Tyson's goal. But he didn't want Jack to go faster than what made him comfortable.

"I understand you have a presentation planned?" asked Gareth.

"That's right," said Sandra. "Thanks to a grant from the Bornhill Foundation, we are able to cover much of the shortfall and preserve the two kennel technician positions, but we are unable to keep some of our animals. We need the funding to provide supplies, veterinary care, and other resources for them."

Tyson sighed. Even though Sandra felt optimistic, and he was appreciative that she was willing to fight for the animals, he was finding his energy waning. The budgeting office employees all seemed interchangeable; he could barely remember any of their faces. And while Gareth seemed welcoming, he was just like Tony or Gary or any of the others. What good was this really going to do?

He watched as Sandra opened up a slideshow and talked about the value of keeping the animals there. She focused on the fact that the shelter's mission statement was to help protect and care for animals, and if they couldn't do that, they would fail in their mission. She also discussed options for downsizing costs for keeping the

animals in question, which was a good move. It showed that they were open to suggestions.

Jack was sitting next to him, and Tyson instinctively took his hand. Warmth filled his heart as Jack squeezed in support. Why had Tyson ever doubted him before? The man had a well of patience and love deep inside him, waiting for the right person to tap into it. And it looked like Tyson was that person.

The presentation was fairly short. One of Sandra's colleagues took a copy of the petition and walked it over to Gareth's desk. Tyson watched the proceedings from the seat he was in. The room was set up strangely, almost like an amphitheater, so he didn't really feel connected to what was going on. The shelter was where he felt like he could do something, take action. When it came to this sort of abstract talk, he felt lost.

"We got over seven thousand signatures on the petition," said Sandra.

Jack let out a low whistle and turned to Tyson, raising his eyebrow. Tyson himself was shocked—he knew they'd gotten a lot, but he hadn't known the final count. This was incredible. It was a significant fraction of the population of Redwood County, as well as several online supporters and constituents from counties bordering Redwood.

"That is impressive for such a short amount of time," said Gareth, flipping through the pages. "I'll take a look at the materials you've provided. My office will let you know about the decision sometime next week."

"Thank you," said Sandra, bowing slightly. "We appreciate the opportunity to come here and make our case."

"Of course. Have a good day," said Gareth.

They'd all been dismissed.

Even though the meeting had been less than an hour long, Tyson felt exhausted. Maybe it was the emotional expenditure from worrying about everything. He wanted to sleep for a thousand years and wake up in a world where he didn't have to worry about shit like budgets.

He walked out of the row of seats and down the stairs, waiting up for Jack. The shelter workers didn't seem particularly animated, and Tyson couldn't blame them. Gareth had been totally impassive, and it was impossible to know how he was going to respond to their request. It was like putting all their effort into a black hole, with no idea of the effect it was having.

Jack had given him a ride from the shelter, and now he drove Tyson back. A small caravan of cars exited the complex, each car heading to the same destination. During the ride, Jack was mostly

silent, but Tyson babbled, feeling the need to say something.

"I just don't feel convinced that this is going to do anything," said Tyson.

"What's that quote?" asked Jack. "Never doubt that a small group of concerned citizens can change the world?"

"I know the one," said Tyson, scowling. "But this is so completely out of our hands. I hate feeling helpless, like Leah's life is hanging in the balance."

Jack sighed. "I hate not being able to help," he said.

"No one can," said Tyson. "It's all up to the damn budgeting office, and we're going to have to live with the decision. We've never faced a situation like this in my time here."

"You know what would cheer you up?" asked Jack. "Come on over to my house later. You can stay for dinner. We can um, maybe hang out after the kids go to bed."

"The kids," repeated Tyson, chuckling. "Yeah, that sounds great. Gets lonely in my condo."

The idea did make him feel better. When he thought about how long it had taken him to get to this point, where he was developing that easy familiarity with Jack, he felt like he'd accomplished something. He'd found another man *and* the potential in him. Despite everything that was happening at the shelter, it felt like his *personal* life was becoming more fulfilling, more complete.

"I guess… At least the gay youth will be bullied less," said Jack.

Tyson's mood deflated. "Are you really bringing that up again?"

Jack shrugged. "Hey, it is a good thing. It's not like the money's being used for I don't know, road signs or something really boring."

Now, Tyson was steamed, after having enjoyed a brief moment of happiness. Why couldn't Jack get it? He was sympathetic, but he just didn't understand how painful it was for Tyson to have to deal with all of this. It was one of the more emotionally stressful things he'd had to handle recently, and it almost felt to him like Jack was making light of it.

"Please, just don't bring up the anti-bullying thing again," said Tyson wearily.

"But it is a good thing, isn't it?" said Jack.

"Well, duh, of course it is," snapped Tyson. "But this is too much for me. It's too much. The dogs I love are going to be killed. I'm not going to say I want gay kids to be bullied. I sure as hell don't. But I can't just trade Leah's life for that. I love her, and I love all the dogs."

Jack blinked at him, seemingly unaware that he'd hit a nerve. God, why was he so oblivious? How could *anyone* be so insensitive?

"I'm sorry," said Jack. "I guess… I guess I didn't realize just how deep it went."

"No, apparently not," Tyson huffed.

They were silent for the rest of the ride, though Tyson leaned over to kiss Jack on the cheek before stepping out. That was something his mother had taught him a long time ago—don't leave anyone angry. You never know what might happen. And forgiveness, for the people you want to keep around in your life, was a powerful thing.

"I'll see you later," said Jack.

"Yeah." Tyson smiled tightly.

He watched Jack pull out of the parking lot and drive off before heading in. At this point, he didn't know which day with Leah was going to be their last. But he had to make the most of the time that he had with her—and Bobsey, and all the others. He had to show them all the love he could before they were transferred.

Twenty-Four – Jack

The house was as quiet as if it were night. That was because Mia and Harold were taking a nap. Mia had had a swimming lesson that morning in Jack's pool, as it was getting a little hot out, and she'd become tired from all the splashing around. But they'd made progress. She'd learned to float pretty decently, and had showed some aptitude for doggy-paddling, which she'd learned from Harold. They'd complained about the wet dog smell afterward, laughing about it together.

As the weeks passed, it was becoming easier for Jack to feel like Mia's dad. He'd become more comfortable touching her, not only affectionately, but also to help her with tasks like tying her shoes or putting clips in her hair. And she'd become a little more affectionate with him, partially due to Harold's influence. Having an animal around made it easier to feel less self-conscious about it.

He'd told her she didn't have to call him Dad or anything else if she didn't want to, and she didn't. She was old enough that it might not feel immediately natural. As long as they had a strong parent-child relationship, it didn't matter what she called him.

Jack finished up with a spreadsheet and sent it to the rest of his team, right as he heard a car pull up in the driveway. Tyson was here. After the events of the morning, he'd need a lot of TLC, and Jack desperately wanted to provide it. He just hoped he would be able to, considering the fact that the last time they'd slept together, he'd been fueled by alcohol.

He was glad he'd gotten over the initial hump by asking Tyson out at all, and now it had fast-forwarded into the kind of relationship where Tyson could casually come over to his house, even though they hadn't even defined it… but it was pretty obvious that neither of them were seeing anyone else, so they might as well be boyfriends.

Jack was still successfully going with the flow, anyway. If he tried to deal with each day at a time, the whole thing became more manageable. Maybe he could tell Julia about Tyson first. She'd be accepting, he knew. She had abandoned their parents' values.

He walked up to the door and opened it, smiling when he saw Tyson. For a brief moment, he realized that if he kept this up, his neighbors would realize he was in a gay relationship.

But he couldn't care what they thought, if he wanted to be happy.

Tyson gave him a hug, then walked in, still looking around like he was impressed with the place.

"How was work?" asked Jack.

"It was fine," said Tyson, shrugging. "Busy day, because it was a weekend *and* some staff had to go to the hearing. But I'm ready to relax now."

"Good. I was thinking we could grill burgers for dinner. The kids are still napping," said Jack.

"Sounds good."

Jack had a small countertop grill, so they worked together to form the patties and cook them. It was relaxing work, and Jack enjoyed the domestic feeling of making food with someone he cared for. This was what it was supposed to be like: comfortable. A partner was supposed to feel like home, and Tyson seemed like he completed Jack's home. He fit right in.

"If Harold wasn't sleeping with her, he'd be all over this," said Jack.

"If I had to go to the shelter after eating here, the dogs would be all over me," said Tyson, laughing. "I have to be careful with what lunches I pack."

"By the way, Tyson, thanks again for helping us pick out Harold. He really is turning out to be a perfect match," said Jack. He'd wanted to say it for a while.

"I told you, I don't make incorrect matches." Tyson smiled. "You're welcome, though. It's a pleasure to see dogs become beloved new members of families."

"I can imagine. I bet that's what the people at Mia's agency feel like," said Jack.

"That can be so much tougher, though," said Tyson. "I can't imagine doing it. Having to match humans together is a whole 'nother ballgame."

"It's worth it, though. Dogs and kids need the same kind of unconditional love and support and boundaries," said Jack. "I've been learning a lot, these past few weeks."

"I'm sure." Tyson hesitated. "I also wanted to mention, Jack… I am sorry about getting upset with you earlier. I know you've helped a lot, and I know you care."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sorry I was dumb enough to keep pushing it." Jack was immensely relieved that that had been squared away. Conflict in relationships worried him, thanks to his relationship with his parents. Julia had always been tougher, more willing to stand up to them, but because Jack had something to hide, he'd found it easier to keep his head down.

After the patties were finished, they got out the rest of the supplies and set them up on the granite surface of the island. "I'll go get Mia," said Jack.

He went up to her room and slowly pushed the door open,

peeking to see if she was awake. She and Harold were fast asleep, and while he didn't want to disturb them, he knew Mia would be upset if she missed out on the opportunity to eat fresh burgers.

"Hey, Mia," he said, gently patting her shoulder.

Her eyes flickered open and she sleepily gazed at him. Harold roused himself, sniffing the air and stretching.

"We just finished making burgers. Me and Tyson, I mean," said Jack.

Shit, was he supposed to introduce her to Tyson as a partner already? Weren't you supposed to introduce kids to new partners only after you were sure about the relationship? But he *was* increasingly becoming sure about it, and she did already know Tyson, anyway.

She smiled. "Okay." Harold hopped off of the bed, and she followed him, energetic and bouncy within just a minute. The nap must have really refreshed her.

Tyson was taking plates out when they arrived back downstairs. "Oh, you didn't have to do all that," said Jack, moving to take the utensils and set them down on the table. "I can handle it."

"It's not a big deal," said Tyson.

Jack helped Mia put her burger together and gave Harold his dinner, and they all sat down at the table. Harold was clearly upset that he wasn't also getting a burger, but he didn't show it after a stern glance from Jack. Jack intended to curb the problem of begging for food before it even began, so he kept a watchful eye.

That didn't stop Harold from wandering and weaving underfoot, nosing around for bits that might have fallen. Mia kept looking down at him, and Jack realized he would have to tell her that feeding the dog people food was a bad idea. He'd done the same thing to Lucy when he was a kid, though. Maybe it was just part of growing up with a dog.

Mia told Tyson all about how she was learning to swim, and Tyson congratulated her. In fact, she carried most of the conversation that evening, regaling them with tales of her adventures in the backyard with Harold, as well as Harold's thoughts about various household events.

Both men were happy to indulge her, and Jack was shocked that she was opening up so much. Granted, she was talking about Harold, mostly, but her thoughts were interspersed in there. Harold was helping her communicate about herself, even if she didn't yet realize it.

It was just *making* decisions that she still had trouble with. Talking about her day had become easier, once she had realized that Jack actually wanted to hear about it. And she would talk endlessly to anyone about the dog. But when she was asked to choose between two

different meals or colors, she clammed up.

That was okay. Progress was progress, and Mia could learn to be decisive when she got older. For now, she was perfect just the way she was, and Jack was determined to help her celebrate herself.

Even Tyson seemed surprised by how outgoing she was, raising his eyebrow at Jack—who shrugged—after a particularly long story about a caterpillar that had been bothering Harold outside.

It was all so comfortable. That was the foremost thought in Jack's mind. There was a sense of transparency that simply hadn't been present in his childhood home. There weren't unspoken emotions, poisoning the well—resentment, anger, sadness. Tyson had actually apologized for something that had been minor, and actually Jack's fault. And Mia was learning to be open, too. Jack wanted to make sure she knew she was allowed to share whatever she wanted to. This was a place where *anyone* could express themselves.

Including Jack.

Twenty-Five – Tyson

After enjoying a family-friendly singing competition on TV, it had been time for a bowl of ice cream and bedtime for Mia and Harold. Jack went upstairs to tuck them in, while Tyson stayed downstairs, idly watching the ads on TV.

He was startled at how easy it was to slip into Jack's life. Because Tyson had spent so much time alone, in his apartment, he thought he would have been used to his own routine. But hanging out with Jack's little family seemed totally natural, and he even felt like he was supposed to be there.

That was not a reaction he had ever expected.

But he wasn't complaining. In the midst of all the anxiety over the shelter, he'd found something good. Even if everything went to shit in that aspect of his life, he could have Jack. Having something new and growing, like a small plant that needed to be nurtured, was a blessing right now. He had something to look forward to.

Jack came back down the stairs and sat down next to Tyson, sighing in contentment. "I love tucking her in," he said. "Something about it… It's just so sweet."

Tyson's heart panged with jealousy. It *would* be lovely to have a child to tuck in. "I can imagine. Mia is such a sweetheart."

"I'm so lucky I got her," said Jack.

There was a brief silence, which was pregnant with expectation. Tyson wanted nothing more than to get intimate with Jack, but he was afraid of spooking him. They'd hooked up a few times, but he was still wary of the fact that he should take it slowly with Jack, even if he was enthusiastic.

But he couldn't resist right now. He scooted closer to Jack, took his chin in his hand, and started kissing him. It was like a switch flipped in Jack, and the other man pressed his body against Tyson's, urgently, like he needed to release something.

There was something a little rougher about this time. Maybe Jack had gotten rid of his blocks, somehow, and was ready to really express himself. Tyson was cool with that. *More* than cool with that. He wanted to see what Jack would be like without all that restraint and self-doubt he'd built up.

Tyson decided to speed the process along by slipping his hands under Jack's shirt, pulling it off, then unzipping his pants and wrapping his fingers around his cock. Within minutes, they were both naked.

"We should probably go up," said Jack.

"Oh shit, yeah," agreed Tyson.

Breaking the spell for just a moment, they gathered their clothes and scurried up the stairs, locking themselves in Jack's bedroom. Tyson took a moment to look around, realizing he actually hadn't taken in the details before. It was sparsely decorated, minimalist, with everything in its place.

It said a lot about Jack.

But his attention was quickly drawn back to the naked man waiting for him on the bed. Tyson joined him, immediately starting to kiss him again. They were writhing together, arms wrapped around each other, legs tangled, cocks touching each other and sending sparks of pleasure up their spines each time.

Tyson started moving his kisses down, intending to give Jack an awesome blow job, but the other man stopped him briefly with a hand on his shoulder.

"I uh, I bought lube," whispered Jack, uncertainty coloring his eyes.

"Oh!" said Tyson. "Awesome."

"I mean, if you want to use it. You don't have to, you know."

"No, I do, as long as you want to, too," said Tyson gently. He tried to sound patient, but he was incredibly excited. They hadn't yet had penetrative sex, and he was thrilled that Jack wanted to try it.

"Good," said Jack, smiling a little.

"So are you a bottom or a top?" asked Tyson, still stroking Jack's cock and kissing his neck.

"Um, hm," said Jack, distracted by the pleasure his body was experiencing. "I don't know. Never really figured it out. Both, maybe?"

"Both is good," said Tyson.

"But maybe I can try first," continued Jack. "Penetrating, you know. Might be easier."

"Okay. Then let me help get you ready." Tyson shot him a wicked smile, then worked his way down to Jack's cock, taking the shaft in his mouth and using plenty of spit to get it nice and smooth.

But he didn't need to do much; Jack was already pretty hard. Tyson kissed his way up Jack's treasure trail and up to his lips again, pressing his tongue into his mouth as if it were a preview of what was going to happen.

Tyson rolled over, so Jack could more easily access his entrance, and spread his legs a little. He heard the crinkle of foil and squirt of lube, and Jack slathering it over his cock, then felt the immediate warmth as Jack lined his body up with his and placed the tip at Tyson's entrance. Tyson squirmed in anticipation, and Jack's cock brushed against his inner thighs.

Jack tried a finger first, easily going all the way in with the

amount of lube he'd used. When he tried to add another finger, they found that it was easy too. Tyson didn't think he'd be so prepared, but he was, and he bucked against Jack's hand, wishing he was going deep enough to hit his prostate.

But that would happen soon enough. Jack took his hand away and held himself against Tyson instead, using his other hand to angle his cock so he could slowly, very slowly, push himself inside. Tyson gasped as his head fit inside the tight ring of muscle, and Jack inched his way in.

"You okay?" Jack whispered.

"Yes, oh my God, this is *perfect*," said Tyson.

Being filled like that was an absolutely heavenly feeling. Yet another thing he'd forgotten during his years-long dry spell. As Jack started to move inside him, he pressed his face into the sheets and clutched at them, balling the cloth up in his fists. He groaned as Jack went in all the way, and could feel his balls pressing against him. Jack was pretty big, Tyson realized, but he could take him, all the same.

"You feel so good inside me," said Tyson.

"And *you* feel so good around me," said Jack.

They fell into a rhythm together, and each time, Jack got just a little bit deeper, pressing against Tyson's prostate rhythmically. Jack reached around and grabbed Tyson's cock, stroking it with the same rhythm, and Tyson could only arch his back and moan, exhilarated with the sensations flooding his body.

They were spooning now, Jack's chest pressed against Tyson's back, except Tyson felt like he was being pushed into the bed with each thrust. He bit his lip as Jack went just deep enough that it was almost uncomfortable, and relished the feeling, still marveling at the fact that he'd somehow gone without this for years. *Years*.

Jack kissed his neck roughly, both men knowing from past experience that he wouldn't leave visible bruises on Tyson's dark skin if he was careful, and Tyson tangled his legs with Jack's, wanting to be as close as humanly possible. They were already joined together in this deliciously primal way, but Tyson wanted to be enveloped by Jack. He was surrounded by his musky smell, layered with cologne, and covered by his body, but he wanted more. He wanted *all* of Jack.

Jack's body tightened against Tyson's. "I'm going to come," he said, almost whispering the words into Tyson's ear.

"Me too," said Tyson, taking over stroking his cock. He knew just the right way to get himself off, of course, and it would be super fucking hot if they came at the same time. It wasn't often that it happened, but when it did…

"I'm there," said Jack, and Tyson pushed himself off the cliff.

They convulsed against each other, moaning and shuddering,

the aftershocks of their orgasms making them twitch even as they came down. But somehow, the fact that they'd come together had given the orgasms even more power, and Tyson was absolutely sure that was the *best* orgasm he'd ever had in his life.

So he told Jack.

"Really? Me too," said Jack. "I had no idea they could even be like that. It was like another level of pleasure entirely."

When Jack pulled out, Tyson turned around and held him closely, looking into his eyes. Jack's eyes were ice blue in the dim light, and his face was just so perfect. Tyson was sure that he was falling in love with this man who had been brave enough to open himself up to him.

And Tyson had been brave enough to do the same. He'd been alone for too long. Never again, he told himself. He had Jack now. And he wasn't letting him go no matter what.

The room was suddenly chilly as the sheen of sweat helped them cool off, and Jack pulled the blanket up to partially cover them. They lay there in silence, enjoying the comforting feeling of being under the covers with each other. Tyson couldn't believe he'd gone this long without having someone else to cuddle up to in bed. It was the best feeling and such a simple pleasure.

"You got work tomorrow?" asked Jack, who had reached for his phone to set an alarm.

"No, not in the morning. I might just have to go in the afternoon," said Tyson. "I can stop at my apartment before then."

"Cool."

"I'm looking forward to going back, finally. There have been rumors going around that the budgeting office bought our appeal," said Tyson.

"Rumors? Be careful…" warned Jack.

"I know. They're not really rumors. Sandra's been talking to a contact over there who said they're really considering it. So it's not like they just let us have the hearing to pay lip service to us. We might be able to nudge them," said Tyson, growing more excited even as he thought about it.

"Still," said Jack. "I just… I don't want to see you get hurt anymore."

Tyson's heart filled up with warmth, when before, he might have become irritated. To hear that Jack cared about him to that extent was a precious thing. "I know," he said. "Thanks. I just think the fact that we got the grant is helping, even though it doesn't really make sense."

"It kinda does… They may not be feeling pressured to cover the entire shortfall, especially now that they have a better idea of

exactly what you need," said Jack.

"Sure. Anyway, it's all thanks to you, Jack. I can't believe you went through all the trouble for us."

"I really did it for you," said Jack quietly.

Wow, was he ever going to stop making him melt? Tyson was overwhelmed. This whole time, he hadn't had any idea of the depths of love Jack was capable of. He'd had a hint, with the adopted child and adopted dog, but to be the recipient of this loyalty was an amazing experience.

He didn't have the words to respond to that, so instead, he kissed Jack again, and before long, they were making out, tongues sliding against each other and cocks getting hard again. Tyson pulled away briefly. His libido was a powerful thing, and he hadn't even known it, because he hadn't had a partner for so long.

"I think I might be ready to go again," he whispered slyly.

"Yeah? Me too… Just see," said Jack, taking Tyson's hand and guiding it downward.

"What are you waiting for?" asked Tyson, going in for a kiss and grabbing Jack's cock, which was thick and hard already in his hand.

As he let his mind relax and focus on what his body was doing, a deep sense of fulfillment enveloped him like a bubble protecting him from the rest of the world. For the first time in forever, Tyson felt complete.

Twenty-Six – Jack

As it turned out, Tyson did not end up sleeping in.

Jack had to get up early to tend to the "kids." They needed breakfast, and Mia needed a little help getting the bath started. Tyson woke up too, with all the commotion, and decided to begin cooking pancakes to make Jack's life a little easier.

Within half an hour, everyone was at the breakfast table. Mia was delighted to see that Tyson had made the pancakes in puppy and heart shapes—and that he had added chocolate chips.

When Tyson had handed her a pancake that he had tried to make look like Harold, she squealed and showed it to the dog. Of course, Harold had tried to eat it, so she admonished him quietly, shaking her finger. Jack and Tyson couldn't help but laugh—she looked so much like a schoolteacher scolding a student.

"You don't have to leave too soon, do you?" asked Jack.

"Nah. I've got quite a while," replied Tyson.

"Then why don't you come out to the back and join in a training session for Harold? I bet you'll have some good pointers," said Jack.

Mia chimed in. "I wanna play fetch with him."

"Oh, so he's learning fetch? He's a good dog, he'll get it soon," said Tyson.

Everyone—except Harold—pitched in to help clean up, and when they went outside, they discovered that it was a beautiful day. Harold immediately started to run around in circles, Mia following him, giggling and squealing. After the kids got the initial burst of energy out of their systems, Mia found a stick and brought it back to Jack and Tyson.

"He doesn't get that he has to return it," said Jack. "He keeps trying to parade it around by himself when he picks it up."

"Hmm." Tyson watched the kids, considering them. "Do you have a rope?"

Did he? Jack thought about it. "I think there's one in the shed." He walked over and opened the old structure, where he kept gardening tools he never used, and found a length of rope which wasn't too gross.

He brought it back to Tyson, who tied one end around the stick. "We're going to throw the stick, then tug it back," he said.

"Brilliant," said Jack. "I would have never thought of that."

"Honestly, I looked it up on the Internet when I had the same problem with one of the shelter dogs," said Tyson.

The trick worked—Harold wanted the stick so much that he

followed it right back to the humans when they tugged on the rope. They made sure to praise him every time he did it. Mia giggled hysterically at the fact that they'd managed to trick him. "Silly dog," she said to him quietly, giving him a hug.

Eventually, he learned that every time they threw the stick, it was going to come right back, so he preemptively came back to them, waiting for them to tug it back and throw it again—after they praised him for returning so quickly. This time, Jack untied the stick from the rope and threw it, unattached.

And Harold brought it back.

"Wow, that was easy," he marveled.

"Harold didn't make the connection that having you throw the stick was way more fun than carrying it around himself. Once you showed him the cycle, he learned to do it himself. It's as easy as that, and since he's got herding dog blood, I'm not surprised he's sharp," said Tyson.

"And I guess we've been trying to teach him for a while," said Jack.

Mia took the lead now, thrilled that Harold had finally learned how to play fetch. She walked out further into the backyard and tried throwing it to him from different areas.

"She's a natural," said Tyson. "You want a dog to know how to do the same trick in different contexts. She must intuitively know that, if she's doing this."

Jack felt a swell of pride. Of course Mia was a smart girl. And to think that she was his—it had only been a couple months since he'd adopted her, after all, and it still seemed surreal that they were a family. But it was a wonderful family, even if it was small.

And maybe it would include Tyson, one day. He seemed to fit right in. Everyone loved him, and when he spent time with them, it seemed like he'd been there for years. If anything, he enhanced the dynamic between Jack and Mia. He didn't take away from it, but instead helped them become closer, even as he got to know her.

God, he was perfect. More perfect than anyone had a right to be. And he was like the missing puzzle piece in Jack's life. He completed Jack's picture of what he'd always wanted his future to look like: cute kid, nice house, good job, caring partner. It was everything he'd ever dreamed of.

Even though it was a simple dream, it could be hard to achieve—he could see that every day, with all the problems people had. But Jack seemed to be one of the lucky few who'd achieved it. He just never knew he'd needed Tyson until the man had eased his way into his life.

Twenty-Seven – Tyson

Tyson's heart pounded as Tony and his assistant filed into the boardroom, especially now that he knew they were the kind of people to deliver bad news in person. This shit with the budgeting office was a rollercoaster, and Tyson was tired of it. Whatever they decided today would be it. The end. There would be no recourse for the animals if they'd decided not to give the shelter the extra funding.

"Thanks for having us here today," said Tony. He looked gloomy. Shit. He wasn't even bothering to hide it.

"Of course," said Sandra, smiling the perfect plastic smile. Tyson admired her for even being able to do that, because he sure as hell couldn't.

"We've decided we cannot fund the shelter at this time," said Tony.

Tyson had to give him credit for not recoiling, because the raw emotion coming off of the shelter staff was overwhelming. The emotional texture of the room was complex and angry, and Tyson wanted to leave. But he had to stick it out.

"Okay," said Sandra. Her smile had faded, but her expression was still neutral, unlike those of the others, who were seething or just plain depressed. "Thank you for your consideration."

That had to be the shortest meeting in the history of meetings held in this room. In just a few seconds, the fate of all these animals had been decided. Weeks of work had come to an end, and for nothing. The budgeting office actually hadn't given them a single cent more. The extra money had only come from the grant Jack got them.

Tony and his assistant made a hasty exit, while the rest of the staff stayed in the boardroom. Tyson sent Jack a quick text message to let him know the verdict.

"Well," said Sandra, now letting her façade fall and her disgust show. "We did our best, everyone. Our absolute best. But now we have to move forward with the contingency plan. The first day of the new fiscal year is next week, so we have to get moving. Are there any questions?"

Everyone was silent. Then someone spoke up; Tyson didn't see who.

"When are we getting the grant money in?"

"I've spoken with Tess," said Sandra, "and she's been working with the Bornhill Foundation. They're sending it in three installments over the next month, so we should be covered. There won't be a gap."

There was another silence. The disappointment was palpable.

"Okay then, if there's nothing else, then everyone is dismissed.

Please keep the board abreast of the moves on the contingency plan. Let's get it wrapped up within the next day or two," said Sandra brusquely.

Everyone filed out of the cold boardroom and back into the shelter. Tyson was utterly despondent, plodding along, staring at the floor and thinking about Leah. That was it. She was doomed. He'd fought for her as best as he could, but it wasn't good enough.

Tina fell in step beside him. "Hey," she said, touching his shoulder.

"Hey." He turned toward her. "I can't do it."

"I know. But we can do it together. I'll help you."

Previously, Tyson would have thought he'd want to handle this alone, but he found himself glad for Tina's company. They walked toward the runs, away from all the other shelter staff. Tyson needed some space, and most of all, he needed to be surrounded by dogs.

"So, we have to get crates ready for moving the animals. Different sizes, for all the dogs and cats. Twenty in total," said Tyson glumly. Why was he being made to do this? The budgeting office people should be doing it, not him.

"Okay," said Tina. "What next?"

"We have to contact the animal control officers to set up a time for the animals to be moved over. They might be able to bring some crates as well."

"I can do that. What time would be best?" asked Tina.

"Um…" Tyson hesitated. "Sooner is probably better. Otherwise I won't be able to sleep tonight. Hell, I won't be sleeping tonight anyway. This afternoon, if they're free. If not, tomorrow."

"Got it. Let's see how many crates we can spare, and then we'll know how many to ask them for," said Tina.

Tyson was glad she had her head on straight, because he didn't. He felt like his legs were made out of jelly and his breathing was shallow. Everything was in stark clarity, like it wasn't real. Surfaces were too shiny, and textures were too detailed.

They walked into one of the storage rooms and counted up crates, based on the sizes they needed. Normally, crates were like safe spaces for animals, cozy spots where they could feel secure. But now, they looked like ominous cages.

"Looks like we just need a few small ones," said Tina, who was walking down the rows and pointing as she counted. "I'll go ahead and make the call. That okay with you?"

"Yeah," said Tyson, sighing. "Thank you for this, Tina. I guess I'll pull the crates out and make sure they're clean."

She left to make the phone call, and Tyson crouched down to the lower level of the shelf, setting aside the crates they needed. Most

of them had been cleaned already, but a few needed wiping down, so he took some wet paper towels and got the loose fur and debris off.

Tina returned within a few minutes. “They’ll be here in just a couple hours, and they’ve got crates,” she said. “We can get the dogs into theirs, and leave the cats for later.”

“Got it,” said Tyson, his voice monotonous. He couldn’t believe this was happening. Absolutely couldn’t believe it. The day had come, and each hour was passing like molasses. If Tina wasn’t helping him, he’d have felt completely ungrounded.

“I went ahead and printed off a list of the dogs who are getting transferred,” she said, in an oddly businesslike voice, like she herself was trying to shut in her emotions and prevent them from spilling out. “So I guess you can start with the ones in this run, and I’ll do the ones in the other.”

Tyson nodded, unable to talk. There was a lump in his throat, and he knew if he tried to say anything, his voice would come out all scratchy and unrecognizable. He took a leash from the hooks by the door and went to get Frederico, an elderly dog who was even more grizzled than Leah.

Leah. He’d have to save her for last, so he could give her one last goodbye.

The pain in his heart was overwhelming as he led the dogs to the crates and set them up with blankets and toys. Most of them were politely confused, because this was such a deviation from the ordinary routine. They had no idea, and it killed Tyson that he couldn’t explain anything to them. But then, maybe it was for the best that they didn’t understand. They didn’t need to know how callous humans were.

Even his movements seemed slowed down, like he was covered with a thick coat of lead, gravity pulling him closer to the ground. He’d experienced depression in high school, and after graduating with his marketing degree, he thought he’d escaped it for good, since he hadn’t had an episode in years. But it was back for just this day. Or perhaps for the next few months, while he got over this horrible incident.

Tina had finished crating all the dogs on her half of the list, and she helped Tyson get the last of his. But she knew he and Leah had a special relationship, so she wordlessly skipped over the old Lab mix, knowing they’d need a moment together.

Leah was the last dog to be crated, and he made his way to her run slowly, like he could stop time by walking as slowly as possible. When he got to her, he unlatched the run and she flowed out, eager to see him as she always was. He crouched down and took her in a hug. Her fur was as soft and warm as a blanket, and for a moment, he felt protected from the injustice of the world outside this room.

When she whined a little, detecting his sadness, he started crying again. Damn it, he didn't want anyone to see him. But Tina was giving him space, and he didn't think anyone would be in here again. He needed this. He needed to let all the pain out, and holding Leah one last time was the way to do it.

He pulled away and she licked his face. But she didn't stop until she'd licked away all his tears, putting a paw on his arm to comfort him. He kissed her on the head again. Should he take a picture? No, it would cheapen the moment. He needed to *feel* right now, and he had plenty of photos of her, anyway.

With great loathing, he put the leash on her collar and stood up, taking her down the corridor, past all the other dogs, who could detect Tyson's unusual emotional aura. They barked, agitated, aware that something weird was going on.

When they got back out into the main corridor, Leah turned toward the back door. Tyson was confused for a moment, his thoughts muddy, until he realized she thought they were going out to the dog park.

And the tears started again. He hastily wiped them on his sleeve, sure that he looked like a complete mess, eyes red and nose running. He wanted to say something to her, explain why they couldn't go out right now, but the words wouldn't come, catching in his throat like there were thorns in there. Instead, he tried smiling clumsily at her and tugging the leash gently, and they entered the other room, where all the other dogs were sitting patiently in their crates.

She looked around curiously; she had probably never been in this room before. "All right," Tyson managed to whisper, "here you go."

Leah stepped into the crate easily and looked at him, mouth open, tongue hanging out, smiling. She completely and utterly trusted that Tyson had her best interests at heart, but he didn't. He was betraying her, and she had no idea. She'd end up at the animal control shelter, wondering where he was, and when they finally had to put her down, she'd never know that it was he who had done this to her.

God, he had to get a grip or he was never going to be able to survive this. He found a bag of treats sitting on a table and passed them around. It made him feel a tiny bit better to give them this small bit of pleasure, but it couldn't assuage the overwhelming guilt. These animals had done nothing but provide him companionship and love, and they deserved better. He deserved better. The whole damn shelter deserved better.

He didn't have any more excuses to stay in this room, so as the dogs continued chewing their treats, he left. He didn't want to look

back, but of course, he did. For that, he was haunted by the image of Leah peering curiously out of her crate, as if to ask, *where are you going?*

Twenty-Eight – Jack

When Jack got the text from Tyson, he knew that the poor man needed cheering up. It had to be damn hard, knowing that you'd fought all you could and had still lost. The grant money was valuable, but the fact that they hadn't received any support from the government had to have been a harsh blow.

So he decided to take Mia and Harold on a visit to the animal shelter. Mia was thrilled about the prospect of seeing more animals, and Harold—well, Harold was just thrilled to be going anywhere, period.

They piled into the car after eating grilled cheese sandwiches and went over to the shelter. But the parking lot was busy this time. There were two large animal control vans outside, navy and boxy with the logo emblazoned on the side. When Jack got out, he saw piles of crates with cats and dogs on the curb. They were being loaded into the vans.

Shit, they were transferring the animals already. Jack couldn't see Tyson anywhere, but he knew this had to be a hard time for him. He helped Mia and Harold out of the car and went into the shelter, asking Tina, who was sitting at the front desk, if Tyson was in today.

Instead of a sly smile, a neutral expression was painted on her face. She was so cheerful normally that this made her seem depressed. Perhaps she was. Jack couldn't imagine that anyone was enjoying this.

He found Tyson in one of the back corridors, leaning over a notebook with a despondent expression. "Hey, Tyson?"

Tyson looked up, but his face was blank. The usual verve that colored his expressions was completely absent, and he looked like he'd been completely emotionally drained. Jack wasn't surprised.

"Yeah? What's up? You get my text?"

"That's why I came," said Jack.

"Well, we're moving the animals out, as you can see. They're going off to the shelter. The officers told me that the summers are busy, so they only have maybe a month to get adopted before…" Tyson trailed off.

"Right," said Jack, saving him from having to complete the sentence.

"You know what Leah did?" Tyson whispered.

"What?" asked Jack, unnerved by this new Tyson. It was radically different, and not in a good way, from how he normally was.

"I was trying to take her to her crate, and she turned to go into the dog park. She thought I was taking her out for some fun. That animal *trusts* me, Jack, and I failed her." He sighed.

God, this was heavy. Jack was awful at comforting people, and he felt adrift. But he had to try, for Tyson's sake. He put his hand on the man's shoulder and rubbed it comfortingly. "You didn't fail her, Tyson. You did the best you could. You all fought for these animals, and it's not your fault that they're being transferred."

"I guess," said Tyson. "But there's a difference between feeling that and knowing it.

Mia tugged at Jack's shirt. "What happened?" she asked. Her eyes were wide. She really wanted to know what was going on.

Jack crouched down to her level. "Well, Mia, you know how we went to the library and everyone talked about how important the shelter was to them? That was because the government wasn't giving the shelter enough money to do everything they wanted to do. They kept trying to ask for the money, but they couldn't get enough, so some of the dogs and cats have to be moved to another shelter." He hesitated here. How could he convey why this was bad, without traumatizing her? "The animals have less of a chance of finding a home if they go there."

"Oh." Mia looked down, and Jack wondered what she was thinking. She knew very well that she was adopted, and she was old enough to know that some kids got adopted quicker than others. "They need money?"

"Yeah," said Jack. "The people I work for gave them some, but they need more if they want to keep the animals here."

Mia blinked at him. "The baseball cards."

Jack blinked right back at her, a string of light bulbs lighting up in his head. She was right. The baseball cards were worth a *lot* of money. Easily enough to cover the shortfall. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

Oh, right. It was the last connection he had to his father. Well, not to his father, exactly, but a childhood in which he'd thought he had a loving, normal father. But these were animals whose lives were at stake. And he wouldn't have to sell the whole collection, just the most valuable cards… Jack hadn't known his grandfather very well, but he didn't think the old man would've minded. Hopefully. And as for his father… He was done with worrying about what his father thought.

"Mia, that's a great idea," he said, nearly choked up with excitement. God, that kid was an angel. If she hadn't reminded him just now…

He stood up. "Tyson, I have an idea."

Tyson looked at him with dark eyes. "What is it?"

"I have enough money to cover the shortfall. Or, well, I will, once I, uh, do some stuff. But you need to stop the animals being

moved until I look into it."

"Um. I'm going to need a whole lot more than 'do some stuff' before I tell animal control to go home," said Tyson, his eyebrow raised. Jack could see the hope in his eyes, though. He was clinging to it.

"I have some valuables I can sell," said Jack. "Really. Trust me. I've had them appraised and everything."

That seemed to be good enough for Tyson, or maybe he just wanted to get into action. Without another word, he marched off, invigorated. What a difference hope could make.

Jack turned the idea over and over in his head, trying to recall what the appraiser had said. There *was* more than enough, though he'd have to sell all the best parts of the collection. But it was a small price to pay if it meant the lives of these animals would be saved.

He felt a tugging on his shirt again. "Are you gonna sell 'em?" asked Mia.

"Yeah, I am," said Jack, crouching down to her level again.

"They were your daddy's cards," she said.

"Yeah. But if it saves the animals, it's the right thing to do, isn't it?"

That light shone in her eyes again, the same one he'd seen back at the library. She was *proud* of him. The feeling that gave him was the best he'd ever experienced, and he wanted to feel it over and over. He wanted them to always be proud of each other, because damn, it was an amazing feeling, knowing that he'd shown her the right thing to do.

"Material things aren't that important," he continued. "I still have other memories of my childhood. I have photos, and I have what's up here." He tapped his head.

Tyson returned. "The officers aren't too happy that they had to come all the way here, but oh my gosh, Jack, everyone else is so happy. I still can't believe it. Are you sure? Like, really sure?"

"Positive," said Jack. "I'll double check first thing when I get home and work on selling them immediately."

Some of the shelter workers had started bringing the dog crates back to this end of the corridor, pulling them on a cart. As they started to bring the dogs back to their runs, Jack could see how the ambiance of the place had completely changed. The dogs seemed livelier, the staff had a spring in their step, and Tyson…

He was as happy as anyone had ever seen him. He walked up to Jack and threw his hands around him, and they hugged tightly. Jack buried his face in Tyson's shoulder and took a deep breath of his smell. He smelled a bit like dog, but Jack didn't care. This was the man he *loved*.

Whoa.

They pulled back. Jack was flushed, overwhelmed from what was going on around him. Tyson grinned at him. “Really, though.”

Jack laughed. “Really. And now that I think about it, the value has probably gone up since the last time I had them appraised.”

Tyson tilted his head and regarded Tyson. “I think I love you, Jack.”

He tripped over the words, but he got them out. “I l-love you too.”

Tyson kissed him, and Jack heard a funny little squeal coming from the direction Mia was standing. When they broke away from each other, Jack looked down at her. She had both her hands covering her mouth, Harold’s leash looped around a wrist.

“How romantic!” she said.

The two men laughed. Jack hadn’t realized how much tension he had been holding, and now he felt loose, limber, carefree in a way he hadn’t since he was a kid. He felt *free*.

“You want to meet Leah?” asked Tyson. “Might as well. I talk about her all the damn time.”

“Sure,” said Jack.

Tyson disappeared to retrieve the dog, and when he returned, he had a proud expression on his face, like Leah was his own child. They took her and the kids outside, so they weren’t in anyone’s way, and Leah and Harold sniffed around each other.

They took to each other immediately, and Mia was delighted to be playing with two dogs. Harold barked and bounced around the older dog, trying to get her to play with him. And she did. She used her paws to play fight with him, but it was clear that she was being exceedingly gentle. And when he bumped into her chest, she pressed her head to his and nuzzled him.

“I’ve never seen two dogs get along like that,” said Tyson.

“Maybe it’s because it’s a unique relationship. They’re like a grandmother and grandson or something,” said Jack.

“I really, really wish I could adopt her,” said Tyson.

“Well, why don’t you?” asked Jack.

“My condo doesn’t allow pets. I told you this, didn’t I? And I don’t have a yard…” He trailed off, still watching Leah with love light in his eyes.

“Well, you know, Tyson, I do,” said Jack, the cogs turning slowly in his brain.

“You do what?”

“I have a yard,” said Jack.

Tyson’s eyes widened. He’d understood Jack’s implication. And just when Jack thought this day couldn’t get any better, he realized it

could still surprise him.

Twenty-Nine – Tyson

The two men were still sweaty and grimy from moving all the boxes and furniture, and they were zoned out on the couch, lounging together with beers. Mia and Harold had gone to sleep; the hot sun had tired them out quickly too, and they'd all had a brief dip in the pool to cool off.

But now, the neighborhood was quiet. It was the end of the day, and they were winding down. Tyson could barely think, he was so exhausted. His muscles were sore, and the beer was bitter and ice cold against his lips. Just what he needed, though if he drank any more, he'd pass right out.

"You don't have that much stuff though," said Jack. It seemed apropos of nothing, but they were so tired that they were conversing slowly, trading sentences and sips of beer.

"Nah. Small place. Just me. Didn't really need much," said Tyson.

And Jack's furniture was a lot nicer than his, anyway. He was still mostly using the starter furniture he'd gotten when he moved out of his parents' place. Much of it was chipped and just old-looking, so there was no point in keeping it. They were planning to have a yard sale soon, toward the end of the summer.

"Can't believe that promotion, either," said Jack.

"Yeah." Tyson flushed with happiness—something that had been continually happening ever since he'd made the decision to move in with Jack. "I guess they were really impressed by how I handled everything."

"You did do a lot of work to fight the budget cuts. And you must have been a good worker all along," said Jack.

"Man. Head Manager. That's going to be tough, but wow…" said Tyson.

They were silent a few more moments; a couple cars zoomed by outside, and some insects added their distinctive summer choruses. It was peaceful, a stark contrast to all the excitement of the day.

"And it'll come with a raise, which you deserve," said Jack.

"Thankfully," said Tyson. "I mean, I know the funding is tight, but it was still hard to scrape by sometimes."

"Well, now you don't have to pay rent," said Jack.

"Yeah. I can actually start paying off some of my debts. The future's looking bright." Tyson smiled. "So, you're going to the appraiser's tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I got an appointment and everything. Once he gives the cards his stamp of approval, I can sell them," said Jack. "We can just

pick out whichever ones we need to to cover the exact sum."

"I still can't believe you're willing to part with them," said Tyson. "I mean, they must mean a lot to you."

"They do. They were my dad's, and some were my grandfather's. But you know what… I told my dad…"

Now this got Tyson's attention. The only thing he knew about Jack's dad was that they didn't talk very often, and he only saw them for holidays, if that. It was unusual for him to have told him about this.

"You did?"

"Yeah, I told him I was going to use it to help the shelter, and he said… He said he was proud of me."

"Really?"

"I know, I couldn't believe it either. But he said it was a good cause and he supported it. I thought he'd be mad I was selling the cards. But then, I guess he didn't care much for them either, or else he would have kept them," said Jack.

"Huh. That's good?"

Jack laughed. "I know, it's confusing. But yeah, I think it's good."

"Lots of good stuff happening in our lives recently," said Tyson.

"It's busy, but yeah. I got Mia, we got Harold, I got you… And now I guess we're getting Leah?"

"Yup," said Tyson. "Thanks, by the way. I love that dog, a lot. We just have a connection."

"Like the one Mia and Harold have," said Jack. "I still can't believe she's become so responsible with Harold. Seven year olds do not usually have their shit together the way she does."

"She's a special girl. I have another piece of good news, by the way," said Tyson, remembering that he'd forgotten to update Jack on this. "You know Bobsey, the little Shih Tzu mix with three legs? He got adopted by this couple, and they got him wheels!"

"Wheels?"

"Yeah! He has a sort of cart that goes behind him, and he can move a lot more quickly now. He doesn't have to hop around. It's kind of hilarious, but when you see how happy he is to be moving more freely…"

"Wow," said Jack. "Wheelchairs for dogs. What will they think of next. That is awesome, though."

"Bobsey was one of my favorites, too. Hell, they're all my favorites. Even the cats and rabbits and iguanas. All of them." Tyson sighed.

Jack turned to him and kissed his nose. "You're *my* favorite."

“Oh yeah?” Tyson put his beer down, his cock stirring to life already. That tone that Jack had used had put him in the mood. Everything that man did put him in the mood, come to think of it. It was love. When you loved someone, that was what it was like. You loved every little thing about them.

They drew themselves up closer to one another, and Jack started kissing Tyson, holding his face in his hands and rubbing his crotch against his. Tyson took a deep breath, inhaling Jack’s strong scent, wanting to completely envelop himself in it. It was the best thing he’d ever smelled.

When they broke away to take their clothes off, Jack spoke. “I love you, Tyson.”

How confident he sounded, how certain. This was not the Jack Tyson had first met, who had been shy and withdrawn, unsure of whether he even wanted to be an out gay man or not.

“I love you too, Jack,” Tyson said, kissing him again and running his hands down his muscular chest.

As they continued their activities, eventually moving up to the bedroom, Tyson realized he felt like he was in a dream. But he knew it wasn’t, because nothing he imagined could match this.

It was perfect.

END

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About the Author:

Rory Wilde loves telling stories about men who are beautiful—inside and out—finding true love. She has been writing since she was a little kid. She also loves animals and is passionate about helping them, which is reflected in her books.

Rory lives in Philadelphia with a feisty adopted cockatiel and enjoys going to museums, exploring the city, and trying new foods.

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